9Marks eJournal

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Editor's Note

In general, the danger of liberalism, which we define broadly as gospel-denial within the church, occurs when we allow the world's demands to ring a little too loudly in our ears. It occurs when we let the world dictate the terms of our beliefs or practices. Or when we let the world determine, "These things are good and worthy, not those things," or, "This is the salvation we are looking for." As soon as we let the world influence the terms of the church's life and mission, we have let another authority enter the house and tie up the king of the church, Christ.

A question for evangelicals to ask themselves is, has the way we think about church prepared us for compromise? The challenge for churches, we're told, is striking the balance between isolation and assimilation. Usually, this translates into, "Change your church structures and the way you talk, but not your doctrine." The trouble is, changing our structures and the way we talk changes the way we think, because words and structures shape thinking. For instance, change how you talk about the gospel and your congregation will think differently about the gospel. Change what membership means, to use another example, and your congregation will begin to understand the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of God's love—and so God himself—differently. In short, the question about finding the balance between isolation and assimilation may be the wrong question. It may open a side door through which the authority of the world sneaks into the church. Wouldn't a better question be, how can we be utterly faithful to God's Word in everything? After all, faithfulness will preclude both isolation and assimilation. It's often been suggested that the doctrinally aberrant Emergent church is a reaction to fundamentalism. This may be true for some individuals, but could it be that the Emergent church's doctrinal aberrations are more the result of an entire generation who grew up in doctrinally anemic seeker-sensitive churches?

It's in this light that evangelicals should always be willing to "examine ourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5), especially since our very place of strength is also our Achilles Heel. Our desire to reach the world is what can lead us to mimic the world. Many things in our churches are encouraging, but some things are discouraging. And for the sake of love, we should, from time to time, take stock of those places where we will be tempted to compromise the gospel and move toward liberalism. That's what this issue of the 9Marks eJournal tries to do.

Michael Lawrence, Carl Trueman, Al Mohler, and Phil Johnson examine how liberalism happens and offer wise counsel for the academic and the pastor's heart. Greg Gilbert, Michael Ovey, Russell Moore, and I point to several specific areas where evangelicals appear to be walking on thin ice (yet a careful reader will notice a slight divergence of views here). Greg Wills, Michael Horton, and Darryl Hart present notable lessons from history, which Bobby Jamieson rounds out by observing some striking similarities between the ecumenical movement of the 20th century and evangelicalism today. Finally, Mack Stiles does the hard work of challenging one particular organization which he loves, I dare say, with the love of Christ—a love which is willing to both build up and tear down for the purposes of holiness and glory.

Dear reader, we offer these pieces not to be alarmists or critics, but in the attempt to be lovers of our churches and yours. Where we overstep, we ask for your patience and loving correction in return.

— Jonathan Leeman

THE MINDSET OF THE NEW EVANGELICAL LIBERALISM

CASE STUDIES IN THE NEW EVANGELICAL LIBERALISM

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE NEW EVANGELICAL LIBERALISM

Evangelism and Social Action: A Tale of Two Trajectories
What do twentieth century ecumenism and twenty-first century evangelicalism have in common? More than you might think.
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The Story of Matt with Matt Chandler
Posted on January 11, 2010
A note from Mark Dever: "This past August, Matt shared an hour with us to talk about his ministry. In light of what has happened to Matt in recent days, we contacted him about publishing this interview. He said he was very happy for us to present it, and that he was continuing to trust in God for the future. As you listen to this interview, thank God for our brother and pray for him."

Pastoral Ministry and Training with Phillip Jensen
Posted on December 1, 2009
Phillip Jensen attacks evangelical assumptions about ministry training, spiritual gifts, and more.

UPCOMING 9MARKS EVENTS

9Marks Workshop
Edinburgh, Scotland
Feb. 12 – 14, 2010
Mark Dever, Paul Rees, and Liam Garvie

9Marks Workshop
Ballymena, Ireland
Feb. 16 – 17, 2010
Mark Dever, Mike Gilbart-Smith, Colin Adams

9Marks Weekender
Washington, DC
Mar. 18 – 22, 2010
Mark Dever and Matt Schmucker

T4G Preconference: Asian Americans Building Healthy Churches
Louisville, Kentucky
Apr. 13, 2010
Jeffrey Jue, Julius Kim, Mark Dever, Jeremy Yong (host)

Together for the Gospel 2010
Louisville, Kentucky
Apr. 13 – 15, 2010
Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, C.J. Mahaney, Al Mohler, Thabiti Anyabwile, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul

Registration is now open!

9Marks Workshop
Hampstead, New Hampshire
May 3 – 4, 2010
Mark Dever, Matt Schmucker, and Jeramie Rinne

Looking Beyond Your Church, to *His* Church — *Not a 9Marks event*
Tupelo, Mississippi
May 21 – 22, 2010
Jonathan Leeman and Richard Phillips

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How to Become a Liberal Without Attending Harvard Divinity School
By Michael Lawrence

Some pastors start off liberal. I had a friend at Duke who was really into religion. In fact, he was so into religion that, unlike the rest of the guys in our freshmen dorm who came to Duke to become doctors or lawyers or engineers, he came in order to become a liberal minister. I don't remember which denomination he was headed into. I just remember being confused as to why anyone would go to an expensive school in order to pursue a low-paying career, the social standing of which was plummeting, just to talk about a book you thought wasn't true and a God you didn't think was there.

These comments are not for those pastors.

Other pastors, having started as evangelicals, become liberal. It's not that they begin to deny the Formula of Chalcedon or the Nicene Creed. It's not that they reject the bodily resurrection of Christ or the virgin birth. It's simply that, over the course of their ministry, sound doctrine increasingly takes a back seat to effective practice and the demands of a growing budget. Hard truths are replaced by happy thoughts, tips for a successful life, and programs designed to attract crowds whose content is devoted to making those crowds feel loved and accepted.

A lot of these pastors are evangelists at heart. They want to reach people with the good news of the gospel. Yet in their relentless search for a better method of communication, they don't always notice that they've trimmed the message in order to better communicate to the people.

Some of these comments apply to those pastors, but they're not really who I have in mind either.

The pastors I want to talk to are pastors like me. I don't mean to be a liberal like my undergraduate friend. And I'm not a rock star evangelist who's built a mega-church by walking the fine edge between relevance and faithfulness, always in danger of falling off that edge into a soft liberalism that loves Jesus, but mainly for what he can do for me, rather than for who he is.

No, I'm a pastor who loves Jesus because he's God Incarnate and who loves the gospel because it's true, regardless of how my life turns out. But I'm also a pastor at risk of becoming a liberal, because I don't just love God. I also love the sheep. And I love myself. And it's those two loves, wrongly focused, that tempt me down a gospel-denying path.

LOVING THE SHEEP MORE THAN THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A good and faithful pastor must love the sheep. That's the model Jesus set for us (John 10). But in fact, the New Testament never tells us as pastors to "love the sheep." Instead we're told to feed the sheep (John 21:15-17), to guard the sheep (Acts 20:28), and to set an example for the sheep (1 Pet 5:3).

But let's face it: the sheep don't always like the meals we've prepared for them; they sometimes chafe under the safeguards we put in place for them; they're not always impressed with the example we set for them. And it's at this point that our own wrongly ordered love for the sheep can lead us astray.

On the one hand, we can be so afraid of losing the love and affection of our sheep that we hold back from saying hard but true things that need to be said. This isn't typically the young pastor's failing, I think, so much as the well-established pastor's temptation. After years of ministry, a crisis occurs which requires you to rebuke good friends, or remove long-serving co-laborers from office, if you want to remain faithful to the gospel. Or a passage comes up that, if preached faithfully, might painfully offend a beloved family in the congregation. Or a long-time personal supporter is nominated to a church office, though, unbeknownst to all in the congregation but you, he's biblically disqualified. If the pastor's mindset has confused friendship with faithfulness, if he's come to value the love of the sheep more than the approval of the Good Shepherd, then he will have rationalized and accommodated and explained his way into

compromise with sin and worldliness before he knows it. He will have taken the first step down the path to a liberalism that trims God's Word in favor of the love and esteem of others.

Recently I sat around a table with a group of leaders from another local church. We were talking about their slide not into liberalism but into ineffectiveness. As we talked about the Bible's critique of their situation, I asked how they got to this point. One wise elder spoke up and said, "Too often in the past, in the conflict between relationships and faithfulness to God's Word, relationships have won out." If we pastors are going to resist the pull to trim God's message for the sake of our congregation's approval, then we must have a mindset that values God's approval above all others.

On the other hand, we can be so impressed with our sheep that we change our message to fit their lives, rather than trusting our message to change their lives. This, I think, is more typical of some younger pastors. We haven't lived long enough to really know that the world always promises more than it delivers. So we're taken in by the glitter and the glam, and think that this time, in this particular case, the world won't disappoint. Older pastors know better. They've not only read 1 Corinthians 7:31, they've lived it.

For most of my adult life, I have been a pastor among the highly educated, the materially successful, and the politically powerful. It's not that I sought these people out as more strategic than others. It's simply where God's providence placed me. In these contexts, it is easy to be star-struck, dazzled by the success of my sheep, impressed by their careers and attainments, and not a little envious. And when big, successful, impressive sheep come to your office and share their thoughts on what Christianity is all about, how it relates to their own career path, and the priority of their work in the kingdom of God, it's easy to believe them.

But what happens when the impressive sheep tell you that their work is more important than evangelism, or faithful church membership? What happens when they tell you that working hard at their career is their witness? What happens when they tell you that their equally impressive non-Christian friends need a less embarrassing formulation of the gospel? If we're more impressed by the sheep than we are by the Good Shepherd, the answer is simple: we will accommodate these sheep to the point that being a Christian never, ever, ever interferes with their impressive lives. The world and its demands for an impressive life will determine the shape of the sheep's discipleship, and our teaching will simply come along to accessorize their worldliness with a few Christian add-ons. If we would call people to follow Christ, and not this world, then above all else we must be impressed by the way of the cross, and by the Good Shepherd who laid down his life there.

LOVING MYSELF MORE THAN MY LORD

It's not just, or even mainly, my wrongly ordered love of the sheep that pulls me toward liberalism. Even more powerful is my love of self. More than once in the New Testament, our powerful self-love is used as a measure for how we should love others. So we're to love our neighbor as our self (Mat. 19:19) and we're to love our wives as our own bodies (Eph 5:28). But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a pride that not only is fully committed to my own glory but that's devoted to getting you to recognize my superior glory as well. Self-love is never content with its own love. It wants everyone else's adoration as well.

How does prideful self-love pull me toward liberalism? I'm pulled toward liberalism when I become more concerned that you think my sermons are brilliant than that they are faithful or useful. It does it when I use my gifts of creativity, or rhetoric, or administration, or analysis to build my own reputation as a super-pastor, rather than put them to the service of the kingdom of God. It does it when I'm content to build a ministry based on my personality, rather than on the power of the gospel. It does it when I become selfish with my pulpit, or when I refuse to hire staff or recognize lay leaders whose strengths might highlight my weaknesses.

But my prideful self-love isn't just about me and how I appear to others. It shows itself in how I respond to challenges as well. It's pride that tempts me to think that the answer to any ministry problem is a better

methodology, a clearer communication strategy, a more effective program. It's pride that causes me to shortchange prayer for planning. It's pride that causes me to lose patience with subordinates and to be offended at the mistakes of others. At the root of my pride is the conviction that the power to solve every challenge lies within me, if I can just bring enough creativity and intelligence and preparation to bear.

But of course, what this means is that I will never attempt anything in ministry that I can't figure out in advance. It's not that I won't be a risk taker. It's that none of my risks will be steps of faith. Rather, every risk I take will be calculated and leveraged based on my personality, my skill set, my experience. And what that means is that the ministry I build, be it small or great, will be a monument to no one's glory but my own. If we as pastors want to resist the temptation to build a ministry to our own glory, then we must be captivated by the glory of the Lord.

A LIBERAL BY ANY OTHER NAME…SMELLS THE SAME

If you want to be a true theological liberal, then you really should go to Harvard Divinity School, or at least read the books they recommend. But the fact is, there's more than one way to become a liberal. The liberal theology of Harvard Divinity traded the knowledge of God for the knowledge of man. God's revelation in Jesus Christ ceased to be the measure of truth, and in its place was substituted a lesser measure, one of our own devising. Yet the kind of liberal pastors that I'm talking to here, the kind that I'm in constant danger of becoming, are no different. We may not have read Bultmann; we may be offended at JEPD. But to the extent that we have made the estimation of man the measure of our ministry, to the extent that we have allowed the sheep to determine the shape of our preaching or our own pride to set the boundaries of our labor, we have become liberals.

May God protect us from such a mindset, and instead give us the mind of Christ, who laid down his life for the sheep, but not to their judgment. Instead, like the Good Shepherd, let us entrust ourselves "to Him who judges justly," and from him "receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Pet. 2:23, 5:4).

Michael Lawrence is an associate pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and is the author of Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry *(Crossway, 2010)*.

January/February 2010

The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind
By Carl Trueman

A few years ago I edited a volume of essays on the doctrine of Scripture with Paul Helm. Just before the deadline for submissions, the project was "named and shamed" by a speaker at an influential evangelical theological conference as being a modern attempt to reaffirm B.B. Warfield's doctrine of Scripture. Within days, one of the contributors emailed me, concerned that his name was going to be associated with such a project. I was able to reassure him that the project was not intended as a defense of Warfield's position but as an exploration of the notion of trustworthiness as it connects both to God and to his Word. The gentleman was reassured and remained on board, but the incident simply served to confirm in my mind what I had long suspected: too many evangelical academics want to have their cake and eat it too. They want the piety, and perhaps the platform, which evangelicalism provides them, but they also want to be accepted by those who hang around the senior common room in the university.

The problem, of course, is that one cannot serve two masters: as someone once said, one ends up hating one and loving the other, or being devoted to one and despising the other.

STRANGE TIMES AND SLIPPERY THEOLOGY

We live in strange times. Hardly a year goes by without some conference on the future of the evangelical church somewhere having at least one speaker, or sometimes even a slate of speakers, who arguably represent precisely the kind of theology that has emptied pews, castrated preaching, and disemboweled commitment to the gospel.

I saw a flyer for just such a conference recently, honoring a great evangelical thinker and critic, where one of the keynote speakers represented precisely the kind of slippery theology which the honoree had devoted his life to debunking. Strange times, indeed.

What is going on? Why this craven need for acceptability by the wider world?

WHY DO EVANGELICAL ACADEMICS CRAVE WORLDLY ACCEPTANCE?

I suspect there are a number of reasons for this problem. First, the context of evangelicalism lends itself to just such confusion. Evangelicalism really does not understand what it is. Is it a movement based on an experience (the new birth), or on theological commitments, or on parachurch institutions? Yet here's the rub: The first (experience) will degenerate into mere subjective mysticism if not connected to the second (theological commitments). The second is now highly disputed among evangelicals, who cannot even agree on the answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" And the third (parachurch institutions) too often either forms part of the problem of defining the second, or, in the USA in particular, becomes less a ministry and more a vehicle for a cult of personality, vulnerable to the kind of criticism made by Eric Hoffer, who said that every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and ends up as a racket. Evangelicalism is a sorry mess, neither pure nor simple.

Second, if a movement does not understand what it is, then it cannot make any really satisfactory determination on who belongs and who does not. The boundaries of a movement are ultimately revealed by the person who comes closest to belonging but who nonetheless does not. Arius is a good early church example. As high and exalted as was his view of Christ, he could still only regard Christ as a creature and not fully God. The boundary was drawn and he was outside of it. Combine the problems of defining evangelical identity with the current cultural penchant for not excluding anybody and you have a heady recipe for total disaster. Say nice things about Jesus, have a warm feeling in your heart when somebody lights a candle, and be kind to your grandmother and—hey presto!—you belong; you too can be an evangelical. Thus we have deniers of penal substitution, of any meaningful notion of biblical authority, of the uniqueness of Christ for salvation, of justification by grace through faith, of the particularity of salvation. No matter: just stress that Jesus was a jolly good bloke, mouth a few orthodox sounding phrases, speak with a bit of engaging passion, and you too can get a membership pass and a

speaking gig. And, if the conferences I mentioned above are anything to go by, we fall for such ruses every time.

Third, there would seem to be a pervasive evangelical inferiority complex. This means that, while we do not wish to exclude anybody, we dread being excluded ourselves. Indeed, for the evangelical academic, in a world so ill-defined, it is always tempting to cut just a few more corners, or keep shtum on just a couple of rather embarrassing doctrinal commitments, in order to have just that little bit more influence, that slightly bigger platform, in the outside world. This is particularly the temptation of evangelical biblical scholars and systematicians whose wider guilds are so utterly unsympathetic to the kind of supernaturalism and old-fashioned truth claims upon which their church constituencies are largely built. In so doing, we kid ourselves that we are doing the Lord's work, that, somehow, because we have articles published in this journal or by that press, we are really making real headway into the unbelieving culture of the theological academy. Not that these things are not good and worthy—I do such things myself—but we must be careful that we do not confuse professional academic achievement with building up the saints or scoring a point for the kingdom.

It remains true (as James Barr pointed out years ago) that evangelical academics are generally respected in the academy only at precisely those points where they are least evangelical. There is a difference between academic or scholarly respectability and intellectual integrity. For a Christian, the latter depends upon the approval of God and is rooted in fidelity to his revealed Word; it does not always mean the same thing as playing by the rules of scholarly guild.

WHAT OUR ACADEMICS NEED: AMBITION…BUT NOT THAT KIND

Finally, too few evangelical academics seem to have much ambition. Perhaps this sounds strange: the desire to hold a tenured university position, to publish with certain presses, to speak at certain scholarly conferences, to be in conversation with the movers and shakers of the guild—these seem like ambitions that are all too common. Yet true ambition, true *Christian* ambition, is surely based in and directed towards the upbuilding of the church, towards serving the people of God, and this is where evangelical academics often fail so signally. The impact evangelical scholars have had on the academy is, by and large, paltry, and often (as noted) confined to those areas where their contributions have been negligibly evangelical. Had the same time and energy been devoted to the building up of the saints, imagine how the church might have been transformed.

This is not to say that high-powered scholarship should be off-limits, nor that the immediate needs of the man or woman in the pew should provide the criteria by which relevance is judged; but it is to say that all theological scholarship should be done with the ultimate goal of building up the saints, confounding the opponents of the gospel, and encouraging the brethren. The highest achievement any evangelical theological scholar can attain is not membership of some elite guild but the knowledge that he or she has done work that strengthened the church and extended the kingdom of God through the local church.

The day is coming when the cultural intellectual elites of evangelicalism—the institutions and the individuals—will face a tough decision. I see the crisis coming on two separate but intimately connected fronts. The day is coming, and perhaps has already come, when, first, to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired, authoritative, and utterly truthful, will be seen as a sign at best of intellectual suicide, at worst of mental illness; and, second, to articulate any form of opposition to homosexual practice will be seen as the moral equivalent of advocating white supremacy or child abuse. In such times, the choice will be clear, those who hold the Christian line will be obvious, and those who have spent their lives trying to serve both orthodoxy and the academy will find that no amount of intellectual contortionism will save them. Being associated with B. B. Warfield will be the least of their worries.

Years ago, Mark Noll wrote a book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, in which he argued that the scandal was that there was no such thing. When it comes to evangelical scholars and scholarship, I disagree: the scandal is not that there is no mind; it is that these days there is precious little evangel.

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Seminary in Philadelphia.

January/February 2010

Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens
By R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Theological liberals do not intend to destroy Christianity, but to save it. As a matter of fact, theological liberalism is motivated by what might be described as an apologetic motivation. The pattern of theological liberalism is all too clear. Theological liberals are absolutely certain that Christianity must be saved…from itself.

LIBERALISM: SAVING CHRISTIANITY FROM ITSELF

The classic liberals of the early twentieth century, often known as modernists, pointed to a vast intellectual change in the society and asserted that Christianity would have to change or die. As historian William R. Hutchison explains, "The hallmark of modernism is the insistence that theology must adopt a sympathetic attitude toward secular culture and must consciously strive to come to terms with it."[1]

This coming to terms with secular culture is deeply rooted in the sense of intellectual liberation that began in the Enlightenment. Protestant liberalism can be traced to European sources, but it arrived very early in America—far earlier than most of today's evangelicals are probably aware. Liberal theology held sway where Unitarianism dominated and in many parts beyond.

Soon after the American Revolution, more organized forms of liberal theology emerged, fueled by a sense of revolution and intellectual liberty. Theologians and preachers began to question the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, claiming that doctrines such as original sin, total depravity, divine sovereignty, and substitutionary atonement violated the moral senses. William Ellery Channing, an influential Unitarian, spoke for many in his generation when he described "the shock given to my moral nature" by the teachings of orthodox Christianity.[2]

Though any number of central beliefs and core doctrines were subjected to liberal revision or outright rejection, the doctrine of hell was often the object of greatest protest and denial.

Considering hell and its related doctrines, Congregationalist pastor Washington Gladden declared: "To teach such a doctrine as this about God is to inflict upon religion a terrible injury and to subvert the very foundations of morality."[3]

Though hell had been a fixture of Christian theology since the New Testament, it became an *odium theologium*—a doctrine considered repugnant by the larger culture and now retained and defended only by those who saw themselves as self-consciously orthodox in theological commitment.

Novelist David Lodge dated the final demise of hell to the decade of the 1960s. "At some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't." University of Chicago historian Martin Marty saw the transition as simple and, by the time it actually occurred, hardly observed. "Hell disappeared. No one noticed," he asserted.[4]

The liberal theologians and preachers who so conveniently discarded hell did so without denying that the Bible clearly teaches the doctrine. They simply asserted the higher authority of the culture's sense of morality. In order to save Christianity from the moral and intellectual damage done by the doctrine, hell simply had to go. Many rejected the doctrine with gusto, claiming the mandate to update the faith in a new intellectual age. Others simply let the doctrine go dormant, never to be mentioned in polite company.

What of today's evangelicals? Though some lampoon the stereotypical "hell-fire and brimstone" preaching of an older evangelical generation, the fact is that most church members may never have heard a sermon on hell—even in an evangelical congregation. Has hell gone dormant among evangelicals as well?

REVISING HELL: A TEST CASE FOR THE SLIDE INTO LIBERALISM

Interestingly, the doctrine of hell serves very well as a test case for the slide into theological liberalism. The pattern of this slide looks something like this.

First, a doctrine simply falls from mention. Over time, it is simply never discussed or presented from the pulpit. Most congregants do not even miss the mention of the doctrine. Those who do become fewer over time. The doctrine is not so much denied as ignored and kept at a distance. Yes, it is admitted, that doctrine has been believed by Christians, but it is no longer a necessary matter of emphasis.

Second, a doctrine is revised and retained in reduced form. There must have been some good reason that Christians historically believed in hell. Some theologians and pastors will then affirm that there is a core affirmation of morality to be preserved, perhaps something like what C. S. Lewis affirmed as "The Tao."[5] The doctrine is reduced.

Third, a doctrine is subjected to a form of ridicule. Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral, known for his message of "Possibility Thinking," once described his motivation for theological reformulation in terms of refocusing theology on "generating trust and positive hope."[6] His method is to point to salvation and the need "to become positive thinkers."[7] Positive thinking does not emphasize escape from hell, "whatever that means and wherever that is."[8]

That statement ridicules hell by dismissing it in terms of "whatever that means and wherever it is." Just don't worry about hell, Schuller suggests. Though few evangelicals are likely to join in the same form of ridicule, many will invent softer forms of marginalizing the doctrine.

Fourth, a doctrine is reformulated in order to remove its intellectual and moral offensiveness. Evangelicals have subjected the doctrine of hell to this strategy for many years now. Some deny that hell is everlasting, arguing for a form of annihilationism or conditional immortality. Others will deny hell as a state of actual torment. John Wenham simply states, "Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice."[9] Some argue that God does not send anyone to hell, and that hell is simply the sum total of human decisions made during earthly lives. God is not really a judge who decides, but a referee who makes certain that rules are followed.

Tulsa pastor Ed Gungor recently wrote that "people are not *sent* to hell, they *go* there."[10] In other words, God just respects human freedom to the degree that he will reluctantly let humans determined to go to hell have their wish.

APOLOGIZING FOR HELL: THE NEW EVANGELICAL EVASION

In recent years, a new pattern of evangelical evasion has surfaced. The Protestant liberals and modernists of the twentieth century simply dismissed the doctrine of hell, having already rejected the truthfulness of Scripture. Thus, they did not enter into elaborate attempts to argue that the Bible did not teach the doctrine—they simply dismissed it.

Though this pattern is found among some who would claim to be evangelicals, this is not the most common evangelical pattern of compromise. A new apologetic move is now evident among some theologians and preachers who *do* affirm the inerrancy of the Bible and the essential truthfulness of the New Testament doctrine of hell. This new move is more subtle, to be sure. In this move the preacher simply says something like this:

"I regret to tell you that the doctrine of hell *is* taught in the Bible. I believe it. I believe it because it is revealed in the Bible. It is not up for renegotiation. We just have to receive it and believe it. I do believe it. I wish it could be otherwise but it is not."

Statements like this reveal a very great deal. The authority of the Bible is clearly affirmed. The speaker affirms what the Bible reveals and rejects accommodation. So far, so good. The problem is in how the affirmation is introduced and explained. In an apologetic gesture, the doctrine is essentially lamented.

What does this say about God? What does this imply about God's truth? Can a truth clearly revealed in the Bible be anything less than good for us? The Bible presents the knowledge of hell just as it presents the knowledge of sin and judgment: these are things we had better know. God reveals these things to us for our good and for our redemption. In this light, the knowledge of these things is grace to us. Apologizing for a doctrine is tantamount to impugning the character of God.

Do we believe that hell is a part of the perfection of God's justice? If not, we have far greater theological problems than those localized to hell.

Several years ago, someone wisely suggested that a good many modern Christians wanted to "air condition hell."[11] The effort continues.

Remember that the liberals and the modernists operated out of an apologetic motivation. They wanted to save Christianity as a relevant message in the modern world and to remove the odious obstacle of what were seen as repugnant and unnecessary doctrines. They wanted to save Christianity from itself.

Today, some in movements such as the emerging church commend the same agenda, and for the same reason. Are we embarrassed by the biblical doctrine of hell?

If so, this generation of evangelicals will face no shortage of embarrassments. The current intellectual context allows virtually no respect for Christian affirmations of the exclusivity of the gospel, the true nature of human sin, the Bible's teachings regarding human sexuality, and any number of other doctrines revealed in the Bible. The lesson of theological liberalism is clear—embarrassment is the gateway drug for theological accommodation and denial.

Be sure of this: it will not stop with the air conditioning of hell.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also serves as Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology.

[1] William R. Hutchison, ed., *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968), p. 4.
[2] Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), p. 18.
[3] Dorrien, p, 275.
[4] Martin E. Marty, "Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument," *Harvard Theological Review*, 78 (1985), 381-398.
[5] See C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001 [1948]).
[6] Robert Schuller, *My Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 127.
[7] Schuller, p. 127-128.
[8] Schuller, p. 127-128.
[9] John Wenhan, *Facing Hell: An Autobiography* (London: Paternoster Press, 1998)., p. 254.
[10] Ed Gungor, *What Bothers Me Most About Christianity* (New York: Howard Books, 2009), p. 196.
[11] See "Hell Air Conditioned," *New Oxford Review*, 58 (June 3, 1998), p. 4.

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The Neo-Liberal Stealth Offensive
By Phil Johnson

The gospel's most dangerous earthly adversaries are not raving atheists who stand outside the door shouting threats and insults. They are church leaders who cultivate a gentle, friendly, pious demeanor but hack away at the foundations of faith under the guise of keeping in step with a changing world.

No Christian should imagine that heresy is always conspicuous or that every purveyor of theological mischief will lay out his agenda in plain and honest terms. The enemy prefers to sow tares secretly, for obvious reasons. Thus Scripture expressly warns us to be on guard against false teachers who creep into the church unnoticed (Jude 4), wolves who sneak into the flock wearing sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15), and servants of Satan who disguise themselves as angels of light (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Theological liberalism is particularly dependent on the stealth offensive. A spiritually healthy church is generally not susceptible to the arrogant skepticism that underlies a liberal's rejection of biblical authority. Liberalism must therefore take root covertly and gain strength and influence gradually. The success or failure of the whole liberal agenda hinges on a patient public-relations campaign.

That is precisely how neo-liberals have managed to get a foothold in the contemporary evangelical movement. Consider how evangelicalism has changed in just a few short decades.

CLASSIC EVANGELICALISM

Historic evangelicalism has two clear distinctives. One is a commitment to the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The other is a conviction that the gospel message is clear and non-negotiable.

Specifically, evangelicals understand the gospel as an announcement of what Christ has done to save sinners, redeem Adam's fallen race, and usher believers into his eternal kingdom. The gospel is not a mandate for sinners to save themselves, redeem humanity, recover human dignity, safeguard cultural diversity, preserve the environment, eliminate poverty, establish a kingdom for themselves, or champion whatever social concept of "salvation" might be popular at the moment. In fact, the gospel expressly teaches that sinners can be justified only through faith in Christ alone, and exclusively by *his* gracious work—not because of any merit they earn for themselves.

The Protestant Reformation clarified and illuminated those same two principles—*sola Scriptura* and *sola fide.* Indeed, they are sometimes known as the formal and material principles of the Reformation. But they weren't novel ideas someone dreamed up out of thin air in the sixteenth century. They are and always have been essential principles of biblical Christianity. In the long course of church history, those truths have frequently been clouded and confused, or mingled with (and sometimes overwhelmed by) bad teaching. Yet since the time of Christ and the apostles those truths have never been totally silenced. They are in fact the very backbone of New Testament doctrine.

Historic evangelicalism made much of that fact. From the dawn of the Reformation through the mid-twentieth century, few evangelicals ever thought of questioning Scripture or modifying the gospel.

CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM

With the advent of the seeker-sensitive movement, however, evangelicals began to be influenced by a new species of entrepreneurial leaders who marginalized those core doctrines by neglect. Most of them didn't overtly *deny* essential biblical truths; but neither did they vigorously stress or defend anything other than their own methodology.

The results were predictable: Churches are now filled with formerly unchurched people who are still untaught and perhaps even unconverted. Multitudes of children raised on a treacly diet of seeker-sensitive religion have grown up to associate the label *evangelical* with superficiality. Most of them cannot tell you what the term originally meant, and they reject whatever vestigial evangelical boundaries or doctrinal distinctives their parents may have held onto. But they still call themselves evangelicals when it's convenient, and many have remained at the fringes of the visible movement, decrying how out of step the church is with their generation. That, after all, is exactly what they learned from their parents.

This is fertile soil for liberalism to burst into full flower, and that is precisely what is already happening. Evangelicals are blithely following a number of trends that advance the neo-liberal agenda. Unless a faithful remnant begins to recognize and resist the neo-liberal strategy, evangelical churches and institutions will eventually succumb to rank liberalism, just as most of the mainstream denominations did a century ago.

FOUR LIBERAL TRENDS EVANGELICALS MUST RESIST

To help you withstand the drift, here are four major trends today's crop of neo-liberal leaders are fostering and taking advantage of:

1. They recklessly follow the zeitgeist.

Theological liberals have always been diligent students of the spirit of the age. A century ago, they were known as "modernists" because post-enlightenment values were the pretext they used to advance the liberal agenda. They insisted that if the church refused to change with the times, Christianity itself would become irrelevant.

Naturally, "changing with the times" meant abridging the gospel message. Sophisticated modern minds would not accept the miracles and other supernatural elements of Scripture. That was okay, the modernists insisted, because the real heart of the Bible's message is the moral and ethical content anyway. Besides, they said, practical virtue is what the church *ought* to focus on. They considered it sheer folly for preachers to stress difficult doctrinal features that sounded primitive and offensive to modern ears, such as the wrath of God, blood atonement, and especially the doctrine of eternal punishment. Future generations would be lost to churches that held onto such beliefs and refused to accommodate modern thought, they solemnly warned. The situation was urgent.

(Of course they were dead wrong. Churches and denominations that embraced modernist ideas declined severely, and some died. Churches that stayed faithful to their evangelical convictions thrived.)

Nowadays, neo-liberals argue that the church needs a thorough overhaul based on the challenge of postmodernism. The world has changed its point of view once more, and the liberals still complain that the church lags behind, out of step, and increasingly irrelevant. Notice, however: although the neo-liberals' pretext departs from the modernism favored by their nineteenth-century counterparts, both the line of argument they use and their theological agenda remain exactly the same. The doctrines postmodern liberals relentlessly challenge are the same ones the modernists rejected, especially God's hatred of sin, penal, substitutionary atonement, and the doctrine of hell.

It's no secret that the world has always despised certain aspects of biblical truth. If it were a legitimate goal for the church to keep in step with the world, it might make sense to review and revise the message from time to time. But the church is forbidden to court the spirit of the age, and one of the main reasons the gospel is such a stumbling block is that it cannot be adapted to suit cultural preferences or alternative worldviews. Instead, it confronts them all.

Beware of church leaders who are more worried about being contemporary than they are about being doctrinally sound, more concerned with their methodology than they are with their message, and more

captivated by political correctness than they are by the truth. The church is not called to ape the world or make Christianity seem cool and likable, but to proclaim the gospel faithfully—including the parts the world usually scoffs at: sin, righteousness, and judgment (cf. Jn. 16:8). Jesus expressly taught that if we are faithful in that task, the Holy Spirit will convict hearts and draw believers to Christ.

The desire to be hip and fashionable leads to another trend currently advancing the neo-liberal agenda:

2. They want the world's admiration at all costs.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with being winsome. As recipients of divine grace and the Spirit's fruit, we should by definition have personal charisma (cf. Gal. 5:19-23). We also ought to maintain a good testimony before the world. In fact, to qualify as an elder, a man "must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace" (1 Tim. 3:7).

That of course speaks of a person's *character*: graciousness, compassion, and a reputation for integrity. It is not a prescription for appeasing worldly tastes or endorsing every earthly fashion. When we need to shave corners off the truth or compromise righteousness in order to gain the world's friendship, bearing the reproach of Christ is an infinitely better option. No true friend of God deliberately seeks the world's camaraderie (Jas. 4:4).

But one of the common characteristics of liberalism is an obsession with gaining the world's approval and admiration *no matter the cost.*

We witnessed the germination of this attitude in the evangelical movement at least four decades ago, especially among contemporary church leaders who let neighborhood surveys and opinion polls determine the style and agenda of the church.

When churches give in to that craving for worldly approval, they inevitably subjugate the gospel to a more popular message. At first, they won't necessarily deny (or even challenge) core gospel truths such as the historical facts outlined in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. But they will abbreviate, modify, or add to the message. The embellishments usually echo whatever happens to be politically correct at the moment—climate change, world hunger, the AIDS crisis, or whatever. Those things will be stressed and talked about repeatedly while the historic facts of Christ's death and resurrection, the great themes of gospel doctrine, and the actual text of Scripture itself will be largely ignored or treated as something to be taken for granted.

Feed any church a steady diet of that for a few years and they will have no means of defense when someone attacks the faith more directly. That's precisely what is happening today with various attacks on substitutionary atonement, the exclusivity of Christ, the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, and other essential Christian truths. All of those things were first downplayed in order to make the church's message sound more "positive." Now they are being subjected to a full-scale assault.

Such problems are exacerbated and the liberal craving for worldly esteem reaches a white-hot intensity in the academic realm. That brings up yet another feature of the neo-liberal agenda to watch out for:

3. Their "faith" comes with an air of intellectual superiority.

Liberals treat faith itself as an academic matter. Their whole system is essentially a wholesale rejection of simple, childlike belief. Their worldview foments an air of academic arrogance, setting human reason in the place of highest authority, treating the Bible with haughty condescension, and showing utter contempt for the kind of faith Christ blessed.

Consequently, liberals are and always have been obsessed with academic respectability. They want the world's esteem as scholars and intellectuals—no matter what they have to compromise to get it. They

sometimes defend that motive by arguing that the secular academy's acceptance is essential to the Christian testimony.

Of course that is a quixotic quest. It is also a denial of the Bible's plain teaching. Believers cannot be faithful to Scripture *and* win general accolades from the wise men, scribes, and debaters of this age. The world hated Jesus, and he made it clear that his faithful disciples mustn't expect—or seek—the world's honor (Jn. 15:18; Luke 6:22; cf. Jas. 4:4). Paul, himself a true scholar in every sense, wrote this world's wisdom off as sheer foolishness: "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God" (1 Cor. 3:18-19).

True Christian scholarship is about *integrity*, not accolades. Liberalism covets the latter, and that explains why liberals are always drawn to ideas that are stylish and politically correct, yet they are resistant to virtually all the hard truths of Christianity, starting with the authority Scripture claims for itself.

Be on guard against that tendency. Here's one more:

4. They despise doctrinal and biblical precision.

This may sound like an oxymoron, but while treating faith as an academic matter, liberals prefer an almost anti-intellectual, agnostic approach to dealing with the specific truth-claims of Scripture. They like their doctrine hazy and indistinct.

One maneuver neo-liberals have perfected in these postmodern times is an artful dodge when they dislike a particular doctrine but cannot afford to make a plain and open denial. Instead, they will claim, "Scripture is simply too unclear on that point. We can't really be sure. The point is disputed by top scholars, and who are we to speak with too much certainty?"

Thus without denying (or affirming) anything in particular, and without even technically dismissing the matter under discussion as an unimportant point, the ruse effectively sets the truth aside. The skeptic's goal is thus accomplished without incurring any of the odium of skepticism.

Heavy doses of that flavor of postmodern, neo-liberal evasion have conditioned multitudes of church members to regard carefulness and precision in handling doctrine as both unimportant and potentially divisive. These days the person who shows evidence of doctrinal scruples is much more likely to be held in suspicion or disdain among evangelicals than the neo-liberals who have deliberately made the study of biblical doctrine seem so cloudy, confusing, and contentious.

In reality—and this is a lesson the church should have learned from both Scripture and church history—unity and harmony cannot exist in the church at all if there is not a common commitment to sound doctrine.

CONCLUSION

As long as these four trends and others like them continue to thrive within the evangelical movement, the threat posed by neo-liberalism looms large. Conservative evangelicals should not grow apathetic or take too much comfort in the apparent meltdown of Emergent Village and the liberal wing of postmodernized Christianity. Even if the Emergent ghetto does finally and completely give up the ghost, many of the leading figures and popular ideas from that movement will simply blend into mainstream evangelicalism, which is growing less mainstream and less evangelical all the time.

We must pay attention to the lessons of history and stand firm on the truth of Scripture—and we desperately need to be more aggressive than we have been so far in opposing these neo-liberal influences.

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What's Happening to InterVarsity?
By J. Mack Stiles

For the better part of 30 years I have been a "company man." My life has been devoted to student ministry through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship as a campus staff worker. All four of my books are published by IVP. The eleven Urbana missions conferences I attended shaped my life as a student and as a staff worker. When IV asked my wife and I to direct a short term mission program to Africa we counted it a privilege to pack up our babies and live our summers in glad service among missionaries and students. I now serve in a sister movement of IV in a Muslim nation. I love IV, and I long for its success. I have no desire to hurt anyone in InterVarsity. But I have deep concerns that IV is consistently and increasingly quickly moving away from the principles and practices which made InterVarsity an influential evangelical force on college campuses.

Let me back up for perspective.

I attended a respected Liberal Arts College in Memphis, Tennessee in the mid 70's. By that time, the college had long cast off its roots in orthodox Christianity and had capitulated to liberal, anti-biblical theology. I remember a religion professor announcing in his New Testament class, "Christianity is one of my favorite religions." It didn't take long to figure out that any resemblance between biblical Christianity and what was being taught in class was a leftover vestige of an earlier era.

So I waded though liberal wastelands during my years in religion classes. As a new believer I knew that I had met Jesus: my faith in Christ had transformed my life and no marginal gloss could ever explain that away. Yet I still struggled with the challenge posed by so-called "higher criticism," and I could have easily given in to the assault on my faith.

How could any new Christian deal alone with the avalanche of higher critical thought imported from German theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, or the silly, incomprehensible theology of Paul Tillich, or the philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, whose heretical book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* was a revered textbook? It's clear to me now that the religion professors disdained evangelical beliefs, including substitutionary atonement, the necessity of the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and the authority of the Bible.

They saw the atonement as barbaric and belief in miracles a hindrance to the true call of Christians: social action. They glorified the spiritual "search," but they made the idea of actually finding something seem pedestrian. The religion department believed in a universal compulsory heaven for everyone—except, of course, for people who espoused a belief that Jesus made exclusive claims. People like those of us in InterVarsity. They ridiculed InterVarsity.

But for me, IV was an oasis in this desert. My IV staff worker put me on a firm biblical footing. He gave me rock solid IVP books such as *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer and F.F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* That book by F.F. Bruce did more for me than answer my questions about marginal glosses: it helped me see that there were biblically honest answers to intellectual questions—answers my religion professors simply refused to consider. My IV staff worker understood the need to define, articulate and hold to clear evangelical doctrine. He himself held to orthodox evangelical doctrine and was able to teach it to others. He, along with thousands of other staff, are the heroes of college campus ministry around the country. I count many of them as friends and colleagues and brothers and sisters to this day.

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO INTERVARSITY?

But lately InterVarsity seems adrift.

A recent Christianity Today article chronicles the pressure a group of InterVarsity students felt to include practicing Roman Catholics on their leadership team. When the students discovered that IV's new doctrinal statement allowed for Roman Catholics in good standing to sign on, they decided to separate

from IV. The national president of IV wrote a response, but seemed defensive and never answered the question, “How many Catholics are on staff with IV?” Sadly, this was a double personal blow as one of the students on the leadership team was my son, who had looked forward for much of his life to being a part of IV on campus, but was disillusioned by the shape of doctrine in IV.

What’s happening to InterVarsity? Has the fellowship become so thoughtless about its theology that it now rejects the solas of the Reformation? I understand that Catholics can be born again. I am happy to partner with Catholics on moral issues in the political arena such as religious liberty. But to partner with Roman Catholics in gospel outreach is a confusion of the gospel. Thoughtful Catholics agree. So, why is IV confused? I worry that it is because IV is muddled about the gospel.

What’s at stake is confusion over the Gospel.

In a recent article on the Urbana web page, an author contended that “Creation care counts as missions.”[1] He called students to “move beyond evangelism,” a call heard in and around IV. I am grateful for Christians who are called to care for the environment as a reflection of our God-given responsibility to tend God’s creation. But I must disagree when anyone says that creation care is equal to preaching the Gospel, or that any believer can move beyond the gospel of grace. As Tim Keller has said, the gospel is not the ABC’s of the Christian life, but the A to Z of the Christian life. Has IV become so confused over the mandate to preach the gospel that we are now called to go into all the world and reduce our carbon footprint?

In the mid 70’s, some in the evangelical world called evangelism and social action equal partners in the missions mandate. This unbiblical principle has so worked its way into modern evangelicalism that we are threatened to go the way mainline liberal churches went in the 40’s and 50’s, and subvert the call to proclaim the Gospel in all the nations.

What’s at stake is a capitulation to a social gospel, rather than seeing social action as an outworking and implication of the gospel. (I deal with this more fully in my upcoming book *Marks of the Messenger* published by, who else, IVP.)

A new call is coming from some segments of IV: “Deeds, not Creeds!” What an awful statement (which is a creed, by the way). And from the movement that championed great theologians and great theology! This statement stems from the idea, in part, that the words of Jesus have greater weight than the words of Paul. Have some in IV really gotten to the point where they look on the Apostle Paul as a man who was merely giving his opinion when he said, “Watch your life and doctrine closely?”

When some move to make the words of Jesus in the gospels greater than the words of Paul, the very authority of the Bible is at stake.

Recently, a national director of an IV department told me of his distaste for “God killing his Son.” I responded, in shock, that the Father and the Son had agreed to this rescue mission to ransom sinners, but he seemed unfazed. Are there really those in IV leadership who have so bought into the heresy peddled by Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Steve Chalke and their ilk that they now see substitutionary atonement as cosmic child abuse?

What’s at stake is orthodox Biblical theology.

The list goes on: issues of Biblical reconciliation, righteousness and justice are confused with neo-Marxist ideology. An egalitarian stand on women in ministry is so sacrosanct that complementarians are unwelcome in IV. And all the while IVP cranks out books that promote the same theology loved by my old religion department and chip away at the very foundation on which IV’s mission stands. These books and ideas may sound new, but only to modern evangelicals who don’t know the history of doctrine. The religion department at my old college in the 70’s would have loved some of today’s IVP books on open theism and postmodern contextualization.

Funding is up, conversion rates are up, but something is wrong. What's happening to InterVarsity?

Notice that I'm not writing about what *has* happened to InterVarsity, merely what *is* happening. I have great hope for the fellowship as brave staff workers proclaim Christ in the face of fierce opposition. I rejoice that so many in the Fellowship are still careful about how they handle the Word of God; manuscript Bible study, for instance, is a gift from IV to the world, many are passionately sharing their faith, some Christians still proclaim the gospel mandate at Urbana, issues of righteousness and justice are championed with theological underpinnings, and IVP still publishes thoughtful biblical books. Yet, four crucial things need to be done for IV to remain in the evangelical orbit.

KNOW THE MISSION

First, IV staff and directors need to remind themselves of the mission of IV—why it exists in the first place. Historically, IV has existed because churches understood two things about the university world: (1) students are a strategic mission field, and will have strategic future influence for good or ill in the world, and (2) serious obstacles challenge our ability to reach the students with the gospel during their university days. Churches understood that Christian students are the best missionaries to other students, and that students could be mobilized on campuses to form groups that would witness to the Lordship of Christ. Staff were hired, through church support, to coordinate and coach these students on campus. These staff were men and women who were university graduates, committed believers, and who were filled with evangelistic zeal for students and faculty.

Those churches that agreed on the gospel and the need to reach college students believed it was worth pooling precious church resources to support IV staff for gospel outreach. They saw the mission as important enough to put aside differences regarding secondary theological positions in order to partner with other churches in this mission to reach the university world.

Yet IV seems to have forgotten why it exists. Bad theology of the gospel and weak ecclesiology are undermining IV's mission. Increasingly, IV's tendency is to take on issues which should be neutral in IV and left for gospel-centered churches to decide. Such secondary doctrinal issues (such as paedo- vs. craedobaptism, Arminianism vs. Calvinism, charismatic vs. cessationist) should ultimately be decided within churches; that's the place to agree or agree to disagree, not IV. Not only that, but InterVarsity seems more and more willing to partner with churches that do not hold to the gospel, from liberal protestant churches to the Roman Catholic church. At the same time, IV is breaking fellowship with people who are solidly evangelical: John Piper, for example, is a *persona non grata* because of his view of women in ministry. Yet N.T. Wright, who's book *Justification* opens the door for a quasi-Catholic view of justification, speaks regularly at IV conferences.

If IV forgets the primacy of its gospel mission and its relationship to the church, it has lost its original, and best, mission.

This is an article about IV, but it needs to be said that if churches had been more attentive to their partnership with IV it could very well be that IV would not be facing these issues.

GUARD THE GOSPEL

Second, you don't need much more than a cursory scan of history to see that solid Christian organizations can easily lose the gospel if they are not attentive. Losing the gospel doesn't happen all at once; it's more like a four-generation process.[2]

The gospel is accepted →
The gospel is assumed →
The gospel is confused →
The gospel is lost

It is tragic for any generation to lose the gospel. But, as Philip Jensen says, the generation that assumes the gospel is the generation most responsible for the loss of the gospel.

When the gospel is assumed, a gospel commitment no longer determines who is or is not put in a leadership positions: from an IV student leadership team on a college campus to senior management at IV headquarters. When the gospel is assumed, Christian leadership begins to depend on skills, personality, or sheer longevity, not gospel focus.

When Intervarsity's leadership is no longer gospel-focused the organization as a whole eventually loses its gospel focus and begins to confuse the gospel. I'm worried that IV is well down that worn path: the gospel has been assumed, and it is now being confused.

Here's one way the gospel becomes confused. The gospel message is the crystallized key components of the way of salvation, compressed into one statement as one might compress carbon into a diamond. It is only when we are able to clearly and concisely define the gospel that we can protect and faithfully proclaim the gospel. It follows the outline of God, Man, Christ, Response (for more on this, see Will Metzger's great IVP book *Tell the Truth*).[3]

Is there more that can be said about the gospel? Of course: volumes, and even entire libraries have been written concerning the gospel or the implications of the gospel. But too often people confuse the implications of living out the gospel with the gospel itself. This is happening today in much the same way that the word "Christian" has come to mean any number of things.

In IV circles, for instance, it is common to say that the "gospel is the whole Bible." Though this may be a powerful way to preach about any number of themes from the Scripture, it's an unfortunate confusion used to justify particular (admittedly biblical) concerns by claiming that they are "the gospel." So is it any wonder, then, there is so much confusion?

Specifically, the gospel is not moral behavior; the gospel is not social action, or any of a number of important things. It is a summary message that offers and secures salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.

Understand that I have given much of my life for social action: from the slums of Nairobi to the war ravaged hills of Guatemala. The implication of the gospel for social action was worth putting my life, my family's lives, and the lives of faithful IV staff and students on the line. But as important as social action is, we still must not confuse the gospel with an implication of gospel living. If we do, the gospel message is lost in a sea of confusion.

It's unfortunate that during the discussions with the leadership of InterVarsity the students in the *Christianity Today* article thought that IV's leadership was confused on the gospel and social action.

All to say that I fear that IV has moved from assuming the gospel to confusing the gospel.

CONFRONT THE ORGANIZATIONAL FEAR OF MAN

Third, IV needs to confront its organizational fear of man.

For years as an IV staff worker, I felt unable to concisely explain to people just what it was that I did. I was a religious worker, but I wasn't a pastor. I was friendly, but I didn't seem to have friends my own age. I hung out on campus, but I wasn't employed by the university—in fact, since I had to raise funds it seemed I wasn't employed by anyone. After a time I grew weary of this countercultural calling. I longed to be like the others around me, just as the nation of Israel longed to have a king. To use biblical language, I was tempted to fear man and covet his approval instead of fearing God (Proverbs 29:25).

The pull of academic respectability is similar, but more consistent, much like the pull of gravity. Christian universities long to be taken seriously academically, but the academic world doesn't always respect the exclusive claims of Jesus. In fact, almost every university in America that started out Christian has

succumbed to this desire and ceased to teach biblical Christianity, starting with Harvard and continuing to the present day.

IV has always had a bit of chip on its organizational shoulder. It parallels the double desire of someone weary of countercultural living and longing for approval from the academic world. It wants to be respected and respectable. I understand this pull.

But the academy will never love IV without domesticating it. That's because the academy hates the message of the gospel and the exclusive claims of Jesus. The academic world hates the message that a sinful world is under the judgment of God for their wicked ways and that their only hope is to repent of their evil and rebellion and come to the cross by faith in order to receive a forgiveness which cannot be bought, earned, or inherited. And so by faith alone, we can be spared on the coming day of judgment, by God's grace and mercy alone.

The world outside the academy, too, wants IV to forget its commitment to proclaiming the barbaric cross, this bloody and unseemly cross, and just do good deeds, preferably the currently popular good deeds celebrities endorse. It's disturbing, for example, that Bono had a live video feed into the last Urbana Missions Conference, drumming up support for work with AIDS victims. I don't have anything against Bono or those who work with people stricken by AIDS, but I could come up with a hundred people, rather than Bono, who should speak about why we should work with AIDS victims as an implication of gospel.

Why do we need the hype of a rock star? Doesn't it smack of pandering to the world? Would Bono challenge us to preach the gospel to people dying of AIDS?. . Doesn't getting a rock star to speak on this seem like a capitulation to human thinking? The kind of human thinking Jesus rebuked Peter for when Peter tried to steer Jesus away from the way of the cross?

Could it be that some of IV's recent desire to redefine the gospel doesn't have anything to do with a new theological discovery missed by hundreds of generations before us, but actually stems from a desire to avoid the scorn of the world?

IV should not forget that people have died for this exclusive message. Some of my colleagues have gone to jail for this message.

IV must resist its desire to be accepted by the academy and the world or it will lose its calling. This is a deadly danger, and it's heartbreaking to see IV's "Schleiermachian" desire to be loved by the very ones who hate the cross. IV must beware of this organizational fear of man.

RESIST THE PULL OF PRAGMATISM

Finally, a child of the fear of man syndrome is the pull of pragmatism, which IV must resist in order to be faithful to the Gospel. If IV confuses its calling and the gospel while the fear of man runs unchecked, IV will move to a corporate pragmatism to survive.

A Christian leader recently cornered me and asked, "Has InterVarsity forgotten that it is a confessional, missional organization?" He continued, "It seems that more and more, IV only asks the questions: What is popular?, What works?, and What sells?" He sensed, in other words, that IV was on the pragmatic bandwagon. It makes sense: if the organization is not driven by a calling, it will be driven by pragmatism. Success drives . pragmatism. Pragmatism never asks the question, "How do we die for Christ?" It only asks the question, "What works?" and "How many?"

So pragmatism elevates success, technique and method over anything else.. Pragmatism turns ministry into a business. It's rarely concerned about the integrity of the message, since ministry is more about style and method than substance and authenticity. And sadly, because success sells, pragmatism often goes unquestioned in the Christian community.

Since liberal theology starts with culture and critiques the Bible (unlike the evangelical who starts with the Bible and critiques the culture), pragmatism works best in a liberal setting. That way, there's no need to worry about creeds trumping deeds, especially when the deeds are successful and popular. So it makes sense that liberal theology would tighten its grip on IV. That's why, as Mark Dever says, "The challenge of pragmatism is more deadly than the challenge of open theism."

If IV does not see pragmatism for what it is, it will certainly cease to be a confessional, missional organization and will go the way of the Student Christian Movement (see Oliver Barclay's book *Whatever Happened to the Jesus Lane Lot?* for more on this) or the YMCA or the Salvation Army.[4]

THERE IS STILL TIME

There is still time for IV to turn things around. I'm hopeful. It's been done before. Just look at what the leadership of Al Mohler did for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. But if IV continues to be forgetful of its mission, confused about the gospel, fearful of the world, and pragmatic about ministry, there is little hope for IV to ever become again what it once was: a force for truly evangelical gospel ministry.

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[1] This author is by no means the only person advocating "creation care" as missions and similar ideas; Christopher J.H. Wright's book *The Mission of God*, published by IVP, presents an extensive biblical-theological case for this very position.
[2] Guarding the Gospel is a four step process in II Tim 2:2.
[3] God is a holy and loving creator God who made Man in his image. There was a time immediately after creation when the first humans lived in perfect relationship with God. But we rebelled against God's rule and choose evil and sin. Even then, in the midst of our sin, God enacted a rescue mission: Jesus, the son of God, fully God and fully man, entered our world and lived a perfect life. Sinful men crucified him, but this was the plan of God, for it was through his death on the cross that he became the perfect sacrifice for fallen humanity. As Jesus hung on the cross God placed upon him the sins of all who would believe in him. Three days later Christ rose from the dead and was seen by many who testified to the risen Christ. He lives today, and offers us forgiveness and a restored relationship with the living God. Our response to his offer of mercy is to turn from sin and put our entire lives in God's hands. When we put our complete faith in Christ's work on the cross and trust him as our Savior, we become the forgiven children of God and heirs of eternal salvation. We see this change in our lives by a desire to follow God as the leader of our lives in all that we do.

January/February 2010

Is the God of the Missional Gospel Too Small?
By Jonathan Leeman

It's been said that liberalism often creeps into the church through the doorway of evangelism and mission work. I think that's right. It's precisely where the church interfaces with the world that the church will be tempted to solve the problems which the world says it must solve.

Faced by the Enlightenment critique of historical Christianity, for example, the Protestant liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wanted a Christianity that could fit the new sciences. As J. Gresham Machen observed, "What is the relation between Christianity and modern culture; may Christianity be maintained in a scientific age? It is this problem which modern liberalism attempts to solve" (*Christianity & Liberalism*, 6). It's as if the world said, "Give us a Christianity which is compatible with naturalism," which the liberals felt bound to oblige.

In our day, there are a number of places where churches, in the interests of evangelism and mission, risk conforming to the world's demands. One area of particular concern is the growing interest in defining the gospel and the church's mission in terms of social justice. More and more evangelical and missional leaders have begun to characterize the gospel of justification by faith alone, penal substitution, and the salvation of souls as a "small gospel." Writers talk about how they once narrowly construed the gospel in such a small and individualistic fashion, and then they describe with excitement their discovery of a bigger gospel, one which addresses the systemic matters of social injustice, poverty, and environmental breakdown.

BIG PROBLEMS?

One writer began his article on the so-called small gospel like this: "Our problems are not small. The most cursory glance at the newspaper will remind us of global crises like AIDS, local catastrophes of senseless violence, family failures, ecological threats, and church skirmishes. These problems resist easy solutions. They are robust—powerful, pervasive, and systemic. Do we have a gospel big enough for these problems?" The big gospel doesn't just occupy itself with petty-minded "sin management," as another author has put it, but with these powerful and systemic global problems.

If the danger of liberalism lies with building the church and its message around the problems the world wants to solve, it's not difficult to see how the area of social justice would be problematic. Christians, no doubt, are called in the Bible to care for the traveler who has been assaulted and left for dead by the side of the road. Wonderfully, therefore, many Christians have thrown themselves into the work of orphanages, inner city renewal, affordable housing, human rights advocacy, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, fair labor advocacy, prosecuting sex traffickers, criminalizing the killing of unborn children, relieving third world debt, and more. Such compassionate work should characterize God's people. The religion which is pure before God is "to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27).

But are these the primary problems which the gospel and the local church as an institution are called to address? Or do they present subtle temptations for churches to begin viewing their mission in the terms set by the world? "Give us a Christianity that solves the problems we care about, like disease, and enslavement, and poverty."

Here are four reasons why I believe the recent emphasis on social justice indicates not the recovery of a lost or underappreciated biblical theme, as some claim, but a first step toward a new liberalism, at least in many of the formulations I have encountered.

A SMALL VIEW OF GOD

Viewing the message or the mission of the church in terms of social justice often betrays a small view of God. It takes the consequences of the Fall—death, disease, poverty, and so on—and makes those the

"big" problems which need to be solved. No doubt the good news, broadly speaking, is that Jesus will ultimately undo all the affects of the Fall. But the Bible doesn't take 66 books and several thousand years of redemptive history just to tell us that. In fact, the entire history of Israel is one giant lesson in the fact a nation can have all the advantages of a just king, just laws, and economic prosperity (see 1 Kings 4:20-25), but that these things are wholly insufficient because the truly big problem still lurks underneath.

The truly big problem does not lie with anything that humanity found outside of Eden. It's not in the effects of the curse. The truly big problem is what got us kicked out of Eden in the first place. It's in the all-important conflict between the nature of the one who issued the curse and the reason we gave him to issue it—our treasonous decision to make ourselves "like God." The problem, in other words, is that God is so exquisitely righteous that his eyes cannot look upon sin, and we have sinned. He is so perfectly good and just that he cannot let the guilty go unpunished, and we are guilty. He is so wonderfully holy that the whole earth is full of his glory, and we have fallen short of his glory. The truly big problem is that, in our sin, we have acted treasonously and hatefully against a tri-personal God who is infinitely glorious and beautiful, the penalty of which is eternal damnation. To say that the gospel is "big" because it solves a human problem instead of a divine problem is, quite simply, to devalue his infinitely divine glory to something less significant than human suffering. I don't mean to make light of human suffering, but we certainly must not make light of transgressions against God's glory.

This should become even clearer after we consider a second problem—hell.

AN INCONSEQUENTIAL VIEW OF HELL

Recent emphases on social justice seem to correspond with an inconsequential view of hell. In other words, one seldom hears talk of hell from missional writers. One recent nearly 600 page book on the mission of God contains only one index entry on hell. Turn to the page itself and one finds that the word merely shows up in a passing biblical quotation. How does a writer talk for almost 600 pages about "God's mission" without discussing hell? Is hell not that big of a problem? Perhaps no one is going there, after all? When hell is mentioned by such leaders, it's redefined as annihilation or as the mere absence of God—the sinner receiving what he asked for, and nothing more.

This is deeply problematic. I have argued at slightly greater length elsewhere that one of the primary reasons we institute laws is to protect something precious. It's against the law to murder because life is precious. It's against the law to steal because property is precious. In that sense, one might say that laws function like fences or security systems. People erect fences and install alarm systems when they want to guard something precious. Furthermore, laws threaten transgressors with a penalty in order to give teeth to the law's value claim. If no penalty follows the transgression of a law, we learn that whatever the so-called law is guarding must not be worth much. If the penalty for transgression is severe, we learn that it is precious.

How valuable and worthy is the glory of God? How precious is he of whom the law speaks? Make hell less and, ironically, you make God's glory less. Make God's wrath against sin less and you make God less. Many Christians, I fear, stretch every which way they can to avoid this conclusion, but doing so suggests that we're still too much under the world's influence than we care to admit. The God of the Bible establishes a direct link between hell and his own glory (Rom. 9:20-24).

A DE-EMPHASIS ON CONVERSION

When God is small and hell isn't so bad, it stands to reason that the doctrine of conversion will find itself sitting quietly on the bench, if not kicked off the team altogether. Hence, missional writers talk about doing good and inviting non-Christians to do good with us (as if sacrifices and charity were more important than a broken and contrite heart). The house builders Habitat for Humanity, I have read, can be said to do kingdom work (as if good actions apart from faith are not sin). And Christians on mission, we're told, have as much to learn from others as they have to teach (as if the church's message and mission is just one more good idea, and not the result of the Holy Spirit entering history and inaugurating a new creation).

At bottom, it can sound as if the missional gospel is built atop a more positive view of humanity. It's almost as if non-Christians aren't *really* lost, blind, enslaved, and dead in their sin. They're just misguided or oppressed. They don't need the Holy Spirit to create them anew; they just need someone to be nice to them, and to offer them a safe place for asking honest questions.

In their defense, many leaders work hard at calling for the both/and: conversation *and* conversion; structural *and* individual transformation. This sounds okay, but it's sort of beside the point. Does the New Testament emphasize such both/ands? Conversation is nowhere the goal; conversion is. And any talk of structural transformation is the necessary result of individual transformation in the context of the church body. Again and again, the New Testament writers—from John 17 to Ephesians 3 and 4—emphasize how these changed individuals become a new people together. *They* are the display of God's glory. In fact, how much does the Bible actually say about the transformation of societal structures? Which leads to the next point…

A REDUCTIONISTIC BIBLICAL STORYLINE

Emphasizing things like social justice and creation care represents a strangely reductionistic reading of the biblical storyline at best. Brave attempts have been made to tie them to the story and purpose of the whole Bible, such as the aforementioned work on the mission of God. Yet what's striking to us is how scarce the biblical material is for describing the church's mission in terms of social justice. We've all seen the proof texts of Jeremiah 29, Matthew 25, Galatians 6:10, and the ancient laws calling Israelites to care for foreigners. But is that what Leviticus is about? Or Isaiah? Or the Gospel of John? Or Romans? Or Hebrews? Or 1 and 2 Peter? Sometimes I wonder if we're all reading the same Bible.

I don't have time to trace out the storyline of the whole Bible (see Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O'Brien's *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* for this purpose), so let me offer my "prooftext"—the story of Jesus' anointing in Bethany (Mark 14:3-9). Some were indignant that a woman poured perfume on Jesus' feet because the "ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." But Jesus instead commended her extravagant act of worship. Now, caring for the poor doesn't *have* to be pitted against worship. No doubt, one *can* worship by caring for the poor. But right here, Jesus does pit them against one another. And worship wins.

In this passage we learn that the worship of God's inestimable glory constitutes the church's primary mission. This means, further, that any form of social activity should serve the purposes of evangelism and discipleship—since evangelism is what produces worshippers. Does this mean that an act of service done for evangelism's sake is hypocritical, as even John Stott has suggested in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*? It is if it's done with a heart of hatred or indifference, sure. But if it's done in love for the person? How is that hypocritical or a bait and switch (Stott's term)? Should we accuse Jesus of a bait and switch for performing miracles in order to demonstrate that he had the power to forgive sin (e.g. Mark 2:10-11)?

Again, our concern in all of this is that evangelical churches have increasingly allowed the world to define which problems need to be solved—which salvation needs to be gained. It does not take supernatural, born-again, new-creation eyes of faith to see that death is a problem, or AIDS, poverty, sex trafficking, and every other horrible consequence of the Fall. Eyes of flesh can see such problems quite well, which is precisely why they become the pet projects of Hollywood stars and global intergovernmental organizations. And these are good projects for Christians to undertake together with the world. On the other hand, it does take supernatural, new-creation eyes of faith to see what it means to fall short of God's glory and why this is more significant than death, which is why proclaiming the gospel is the unique mandate of the church and its uppermost priority.

Christians should care for the poor and seek the justice of the city for a number of reasons. *In order of priority*, Christians should do this (i) to provide an occasion for sharing the gospel of Christ's salvation of sinners, (ii) to provide an extraordinarily dim picture of God's generosity and justice, and (iii) to give expression to the compassion which God has planted in our hearts for those who suffer. That said, were we to feed every mouth and level every unjust inequality on the planet, we would have, at best, the

restoration of Israel in the high days of King Solomon, when all Israel "lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). But how long did that last? Was there not a bigger problem to be solved? Didn't God's people have a more important task to accomplish?

In fact, would it not merely be a return to Eden? Is that what we're after?

CONCLUSION

To say that liberalism sneaks in through evangelism is to say that other places of one's doctrine might be orthodox. For instance, the God of the missional church can sound big. Karl Barth, whose writings are sometimes credited with standing at the fountainhead of missional thinking, begins his chapter on the reality of God in *Church Dogmatics* with two short but very big words: "God is." All theology, he goes on to explain, can say nothing more than "God is." Barth's God sounds like a big God. Yet Barth, like so many missional thinkers, reformulates hell such that it's not clear if anyone is going there. Say what you will about the "big God" of the neo-orthodox. Talk as much as you like about the Trinity, as many missional writers do. Still, any missional gospel which gives equal weight to addressing the cause and the consequences of the Fall brings, at best, an internal contradiction into the entire system.

The big gospel is the gospel which address the big problem a big God has with sinful human beings. Say that our big problem is something which humans experience and you will eventually end up with a different gospel, no matter what else you say about God.

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January/February 2010

What Would Athanasius Do: Is The Great Tradition Enough?
By Greg Gilbert

About every sixth Sunday, my church in Washington confesses our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed. The next week, we do the same thing with the Nicene Creed of 325, and then a week later with the Nicene Creed of 381. When we introduce those creeds, we revel in the fact that for nearly two thousand years, Christians have been confessing their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ using the words of these creeds.

When I was at a church in Louisville, Kentucky, we even adopted the Nicene Creed of 381 as part of our church's statement of faith. Our hope was to show that, far from being a brittle, fractious little church, we were standing in a long and deep tradition of Christian confession and witness. We were not an island, and we wanted the world to know it.

I love the ancient creeds. They are elegant and beautiful in their simplicity, and they state some of the most foundational truths of Christianity with an admirable care and precision of expression. Jesus Christ is "begotten, not made," Nicaea asserts. He is "light from light" and "true God from true God," not merely a similar light or a similar God, but "of the same essence with the Father." Christians can be wonderfully instructed by being led to confess their faith with such time-tested and carefully honed phrases.

THE GREAT TRADITION: A NEW RALLYING POINT FOR UNITY?

In recent years, however, there seems to be an impulse among many evangelicals to try to make these ancient creeds—the "Great Tradition," as the collection of early creeds are often called—into something more. They have been turned into something of a rallying point for those who would like to see the theological differences that exist between evangelicals and, well, everyone else, narrowed and submerged.

Simply put, the argument is that it is in this Great Tradition—which usually comprises the Apostles' Creed, the two Nicene Creeds, the Athanasian Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon—that we find the essence of what it means to be a Christian. These are the *ecumenical* creeds, the argument goes, the *universal* creeds adopted by the church in its early years, and therefore they form a necessary and even *sufficient* ground of unity between Christians. If you can affirm those ancient creeds, it's said, then you have all that is necessary to be counted and welcomed as a Christian.

As much as I love all those creeds, I'd argue that this way of thinking doesn't finally hold up. At the end of the day the Great Tradition, at least defined as the words of those creeds, simply isn't going to be enough to ground Christian unity. Let me give you a few reasons why.

WHY THE GREAT TRADITION IS NOT ENOUGH

First, it's important to remind ourselves that the Great Tradition is only *kind of* ancient. As old as those creeds are, they do not stand at the fountainhead of Christian truth. They are neither as old nor as authoritative as the Bible. In fact, the creeds are entirely derivative from and therefore dependent on what the Bible teaches, and they are useful and true only insofar as they accurately summarize what the Bible says. Often the tendency is to think that because the creeds are ancient and revered, everything they say is true. We should not assume that; rather, we should test the creeds by the standard of Scripture.

Second, we must acknowledge that the Great Tradition is itself broken. If we're going to use the creeds as our standard of unity, we're going to have to decide which *version* of each creed we're going to use. The fact is, there is no perfectly clean "Great Tradition." All of these creeds were wrangled over, amended, changed, chopped, and redone. They even became the cause of massive splits between churches. So for example, which version of the Apostles' Creed will we take as being part of our Great Tradition: the one which says that Jesus "descended into Hell," or the one that leaves that out? Even more, which version of the Nicene Creed will we use, the one that includes the word *filioque* (asserting that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son) or the one which deliberately

rejects it? There may have been a time when people thought the ecumenical creeds were a sufficient basis for unity among all Christians; that time ended, though—and fairly dramatically, too—in 1054.

Third, the great tradition is incomplete. What I mean by that is that all the ancient creeds were written in response to specific heresies. The Nicene Creed, for example, spends such a large amount of time on the fact that Jesus was of the same essence as the Father precisely because that is what was at issue when the creed was written. Thus it simply doesn't deal with other truths at the same length and with the same level of theological detail. For crying out loud, all the 325 version says about the Holy Spirit is "We believe in him!" Well, good for you!

What this means is that the creeds defined the boundaries of orthodox Christianity only when it came to specific questions. They fortified spans of the wall that were under particular attack. They did not claim and did not intend to lay out the full, sufficient boundaries of orthodoxy. Of course that doesn't mean that the creeds are not still useful to us. They are. The ancient creeds defined the boundaries around several key truths of the Christian faith very well, and we'd be wrong not to heed them. But we shouldn't think that they defined the boundaries of *every* truth, nor should we think that they contain everything we need for defining and defending the faith.

The fact is, there were many truths which are just as near to the heart of the gospel as those dealt with in the creeds, and yet which the creeds did not deal with in any detail. And why not? Because those truths were not challenged strongly until centuries later. A tremendously important example of this is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. As Protestants, we understand that doctrine to lie at the very center of the gospel—salvation is wholly by virtue of Christ's life and death imputed to us, and not at all by virtue of anything in us. To deny that is, at some level, to put one's faith in oneself rather than in Christ. And yet that issue did not come to a critically sharp point until the 16th century (or perhaps slightly before).

Fourth, the Great Tradition is open to interpretation. There are people in all kinds of "Christian" traditions who could affirm the words of the ancient creeds, and yet who would mean by those words something very different from what you and I would mean. Of course, if you want to ground unity not on the words themselves, but on a particular *interpretation* of those words—like the Reformers' interpretation, for example, over against the Pope's or the Patriarch's—well, fine. I could be all for that because then we'd be requiring people to interpret the phrase "one baptism for the remission of sins," for example, as *not* meaning baptismal regeneration. And so on. But then again, that would just dump us right back into those unfortunate theological arguments we're trying to escape by means of the Great Tradition, wouldn't it?

PAPERING OVER DISTINCTIONS DOES NOT PRESERVE THE GOSPEL

Like it or not, the gospel has always been defended and clarified by making distinctions, not by ignoring them. We as Protestant evangelicals believe things that Roman Catholics do not. They believe things that we do not. And both of us believe things that the Eastern Orthodox church does not, and vice versa. In fact, the Great Tradition itself stands as testimony to the necessity of drawing distinctions in order to safeguard the gospel.

It's pretty ironic, isn't it, that the "Great Tradition," forged in the fires of brutal fights against untruth, is now being used by some as a means of papering over distinctions and minimizing differences! That's a shame, because the men who wrote and adopted those creeds were not at all in the business of minimizing distinctions. They were in the business of *making* them, and thereby making the gospel clear against error and challenge. That work has continued long after those men died, and we have now seen 1500 more years of clarification, definition, and distinctions being made in defense of the gospel. So use the creeds and love the creeds. But if we throw away those 1500 years' worth of distinctions and make our unity rest, not a little arbitrarily, on a few (specific versions of) creeds from the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, we'll wind up muddying the gospel rather than clarifying it.

And somehow I doubt Athanasius would applaud us for that.

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January/February 2010

Notes from the Future: Evangelical Liberalism in the UK
By Mike Ovey

The Lord Jesus called me into his kingdom in April 1974 in a Baptist church in Southampton, England. He had blessed me with a Christian family, and my conversion was very much a humble acceptance in my heart of truths I had long known in my head. Then, almost immediately after my conversion, I found myself (as a 15 year old) having to resist liberal theology from my fellow pupils at school, and even more so from my teachers.

I've used the word "liberal," though it felt very different from the liberalism I now see and sense. To get a grip on where things might go in the future, as far as human wisdom allows, I want to think about the difference between liberalism then and now (typical Englishman, looking at history to see the future!). This is my personal perspective, limited by place (England and part of Australia), and by ignorance of much work going on in those places. And, despite the problems outlined here, there is much that is thoroughly encouraging.

OLD-STYLE LIBERALS

Back then, theological liberals inside and outside the Church of England were very clear they were not evangelicals. I found them often intelligent, frequently generous, and oddly tolerant of my views, although sometimes patronizingly. For them, my evangelicalism betrayed my personal immaturity and, God willing, I would outgrow it. They set great store on the human intellect. What did not commend itself to their intellects could not be true, even if said by Scripture. With the benefit of hindsight I see this was the legacy of the nineteenth-century "liberal catholic" theological school, led by Charles Gore.

Five things strike me about this legacy. First, I'm struck by the legacy's conservatism. That sounds odd. But on the ethical issues of the day (abortion, drugs, promiscuity) and on much theology (Is there a God? Did Jesus rise? Is sin a real problem?) it returned conservative answers. That disguised both to them and us the gulf that lay between us.

Secondly, the legacy was so, so English. It was decent and humane, despite its faults, and that resonated very deeply with middle-class social ideals. That was certainly part of liberalism's attraction, and the social continuity between them and us evangelicals was very powerful.

Thirdly, the legacy was very clear what it was not, namely, evangelical. They had a clear sense of who we were, what we believed and where the differences on the Bible lay. That did not preclude a relationship, as their attitude was largely condescending rather than hostile.

Fourthly, the legacy had a sinful self-sufficiency. Study of the Bible was in some senses still rigorous, but it was study with a view to agreeing and approving, not obeying. Liberals accepted that the Bible said something *definite.* People could misunderstand the Bible and get it wrong. To that extent, the Bible was still a book held in common between evangelicals and liberals. We could agree about what Mark 10:45 said, while disagreeing about whether or not it was true. Agreeing but not obeying is hugely tempting to the sinful human heart. All of us, I suspect, find this an ongoing struggle. The passage of the Bible which confronts this old-style liberal attitude is Mark 7:13.

Fifthly, the legacy was unstable. Given its views on the Bible, how on earth could it cling to conservative ethical and theological values? Wouldn't it have to change the values, or change its view on Scripture? Charles Gore exemplified this. He argued that the human mind is like God's (theomorphic), and what is not wrong to us would not be wrong to him either. Yet as bishop of Oxford in the 1920s he battled to uphold traditional views on Christ and was criticized precisely because the deniers of the tradition he battled were carrying out his own program. And so it has proved. The liberalism of those days is largely now displaced by "liberalisms" which differ from it hugely in terms of theological content.

The inherent instability of theological liberalism is critical. It helps explain both how things have moved so far since 1974, and why we find contradictory impulses in contemporary liberalism.

Are there still old-style liberals around? Yes, but fewer and fewer. Some old-style liberals have moved theologically, and many are retired. But above all, I think, conditions are not so conducive to producing old-style liberals any more.

NEW-STYLE LIBERALS

So what's changed? Today, many of those I would call liberals would proudly call themselves "evangelical." So why aren't they evangelicals? After all, they affirm miracles, Jesus' physical resurrection, the need for conversion, and the centrality of the cross. Aren't those things what evangelicalism is all about?

Recently, we in Britain have had to confront that very question, with prominent evangelicals denying penal substitution but claiming they are still evangelical. On what grounds? Because (they say) they simply teach what they find in the Bible. They want to live under the Bible. How then, they ask, can they be called liberal? This has come up time and again—over penal substitution, over Clark Pinnock and open theism, over questions of practicing homosexuality. These are said to be *possible* evangelical views, because evangelicals in good conscience hold them as biblical teaching.

Several things strike me about this.

First, there is confusion. This confusion is both doctrinal and relational. Doctrinally, "evangelicalism" now covers positions that would have been deemed "liberal" in my youth. With this doctrinal confusion comes enormous difficulty in the relational matters of rebuke and discipline and correction. I think this stems principally from confusion over the Bible itself. "Evangelicals" all agree that God speaks. But just what does he say?

Secondly, there is cultural conformity. A critical motor behind the three issues so obvious on the UK scene (penal substitution, sexual ethics and open theism) is the urge to explain and vindicate Christian faith on the basis of what unbelieving people in our culture can accept. The obvious biblical warning against this can be found in 2 Timothy 4:1 and following where Paul speaks of accommodation. There are praiseworthy motives to make the faith attractive here, but, I fear, there are also fatal accommodations. This is why new-style liberalism looks so different in content from old-style liberalism: they are accommodated to different UK cultures.

Thirdly, UK evangelicalism suffers, I think, from a lack of confidence in the Bible. This is counter-intuitive and difficult. It has become very hard to "prove" my interpretation against any-one else's. Ingenuity and a postmodern outlook risk making the Bible a wax nose, molded into whatever shape one wants. "The reader is the author" runs the post-modern mood, and the tradition of private interpretation of the Bible fits all too easily into a highly individualistic culture. In current debates, I find, appealing to a biblical passage too often does not further the discussion but merely introduces convoluted and indecisive hermeneutical arguments. Thus, there is far less confidence in the Bible as a book we hold *in common* and under which we sit *together*. While we sit under passages we like, we risk twisting those we don't, claiming meanwhile that we are Bible people. Under those circumstances, cultural conformity comes too easily.

Mark 14:18-27 is a key passage we must recover, especially verse 27. In it, Jesus teaches that some interpretations are simply *wrong*, no matter how sincere the interpreter is.

Fourthly, instability is the inevitable result of our confusion, cultural conformity, and lack of confidence. UK evangelicalism seems to be an unstable beast, comprising contradictory theologies without widely-accepted criteria for resolution. This creates strong pressures towards fragmentation, which is presently occurring, although there are also encouraging signs of co-operation across previous divides.

The instability caused by cultural conformity matters greatly, because our culture itself is changing fast. New-style liberalism, with its nominal profession to be evangelical, will itself be replaced, though we don't know with what. This puts a premium on a deep and thorough understanding of the gospel, because it

must be applied to, and defended from, whatever new cultures we encounter both outside and inside our churches.

FOR EVERY ACTION…

Lastly, the provocations of new-style evangelical liberalism can push one towards something else that is equally unhealthy. Thus against evangelical liberalism's individualism and anti-authoritarianism comes a new authoritarianism which can mistake obeying a guru for obeying the living God. Against evangelical liberalism's cultural conformism comes a culture-rejecting attitude that is ghettoizing and exclusivist. Against evangelical liberalism's antipathy to treating some things as of first importance comes an attitude that sees all things as of first importance. There are signs this reactionary attitude is gathering speed, and it can be just as unbiblical as any of the new-style liberal attitudes I have just outlined.

On reflection, I wonder whether new-style liberalism and its unwelcome mirror image do not both understate a key Christian virtue—humility. The new-style liberal needs the humility to approach the Bible as a reader, not an author. The reactionary needs the humility to live out the truth that disagreement can legitimately take place this side of glory.

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Social Gospel Redux?
By Russell D. Moore

He said he'd wished I'd preached on Judges.

I was the guest preacher that day and this was one of those sluggish congregations where you feel as though you're looking into the eyes of department store mannequins. I'd just finished preaching a gospel sermon on the new birth from the third chapter of John. And the man approached me to say he'd love to hear me preach on Judges, because "that's what we really need."

I said I'd wished I'd known that. The Book of Judges is one of my favorites, and I'd have been glad to preach the gospel of Christ from the account of the days when "there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes." The Book of Judges defines the scope of human rebellion, and the longing for a kingdom that can only come in Jesus.

So I said, "I'll tell you what: anytime you want, I'll come back and preach on Judges."

He was excited, for the first time that morning it seemed. "Great," he said. "We need it. I'll tell you…what the Democrats are doing—filibustering President Bush's judges…it's just not right."

It took a second or so for me to get what he was saying. He was worried about judicial filibusters, not about the canonical Book of Judges. He wanted a sermon that was relevant to the problems of the world, and he thought the new birth was less relevant than congressional roadblocks to appointments to the federal judiciary.

In one sense, I suppose, that's normal. After all, people tend to categorize what's important by what the people around them are talking about. And no one on Fox News had been discussing what to do with unregenerate humanity that morning. They'd been talking about judicial nominations. This seemed "real" to him, and he wanted a word from God.

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL: A MORE "REAL" CHRISTIANITY?

This man's experience is almost exactly what the pioneers of the "social gospel" were trying to get at: a Christianity that moves to something more "real" than church doctrines and religious experience. The social gospel movement of the early twentieth century picked up on this human impulse and designed a theology and a mission around it. And it seems that, in some ways, the old social gospel is back.

The pioneer of the social gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist who was alarmed by the plight of the poor in places ranging from Hell's Kitchen in New York to the working class neighborhoods of Louisville, Kentucky. Rauschenbusch and other social gospel advocates wanted to make Christianity relevant to the social crisis in areas ranging from liquor traffic to housing conditions to labor negotiations to global peacemaking. But the social gospel advocates weren't simply "applying" historic orthodox Christianity to these problems. The seeming impotence of traditional Christianity to address these issues was, for the social gospel pioneers, evidence that something was wrong with Christianity as it was then being articulated.

The social gospel believed Christianity's problem was that it was too individual—focused as it was on personal regeneration and a gospel of salvation from judgment. The social gospel sought to redirect Christians away from "pie in the sky by and by" (that is, eternal life) and toward peace and justice in the present. Regeneration came to be articulated mostly in terms of social justice rather than peace with God and neighbor. And the kingdom of God came to be articulated in terms of the evolutionary progress of history rather than a cataclysmic invasion of history culminating in resurrection from the dead.

At the same time, the social gospel sought to deemphasize the centrality of the church as a local congregation (or even as the universal Body of Christ). "The Church is one social institution alongside of

the family, the industrial organization of society, and the State," Rauschenbusch wrote. "The kingdom of God is in all these, and realizes itself through them all."

For the social gospel, then, Christianity is defined by Christian social action in the name of Jesus, not by doctrines about Jesus or experiences with Jesus. The social gospel stood then with the "modernists" against the so-called "fundamentalists" in the doctrinal controversies of the early twentieth century because for them Christianity wasn't about whether one affirmed the virgin birth or the second coming or the authority of Scripture or even the bodily resurrection. Christianity was defined by following Jesus, which meant "walking in his steps" in terms of advocacy for social justice and global change.

The social gospel did indeed advocate evangelism, but the evangelism was often a means to an end—to the "Christianization" of a locality or of the world—so that social change might result. Because progressives of this time often believed monotheistic Christianity was the evolutionary pinnacle of human religion, they believed a modern Christian identity could democratize, and thus "civilize", the "heathen" social barbarisms around the world. Christian missions then would mean increased living conditions, more just industrial policies, better living conditions for women and children, and so forth. In this sense, the social gospel has a lot in common with, for instance, conservative commentator Ann Coulter's insistence that the Islamic world be "evangelized" to Christianity—as part of the defeat of jihadist extremism in the "war on terror."

IS THE EMERGING CHURCH A RENEWED SOCIAL GOSPEL?

When people ask me if I think the "emerging church" is a renewed social gospel, I normally have to hesitate. Without wanting to sound like former President Clinton before the special prosecutors, I have to say that it depends on what you mean by "social gospel," and what you mean by "emerging church."

As others have noted, the "emerging church" is a designation that means very little, and means less and less every day. Any designation that can be used by some to describe orthodox, evangelistic pastors such as Mark Driscoll and Dan Kimball in the same category as teachers such as Brian McLaren and Rob Bell is a close to meaningless term. This confuses the issue.

At the same time, the issue is confused when some evangelicals are quick to label as "social gospel" any social action or concern done by the body of Christ. Evangelicals can disagree about whether the church's outward mission is primarily evangelistic, or whether it's actually multi-focused. This debate, among conservative gospel-believing followers of Christ, though, is not a debate between the social gospel and the gospel. This doesn't mean the debate is not important; just that it's a different debate. Some evangelicals might wrongly suspect concern for poverty, for example, or orphan care or spousal abuse as a kind of "social gospel."

The social gospel isn't in the ministries of those who—transformed by Jesus—share with him his burden for the "least of these, my brothers." It is seen, instead, in the teachings of those who seek to replace a gospel of justification with a program of justice, those who seek to de-emphasize the new birth in favor of social action. That is definitely resurgent.

Brian McLaren, for instance, caricatures the "legal view" of personal forgiveness of sin through the atonement of Christ as part of what must change about Christianity. Doug Pagitt calls on contemporary Christianity to abandon a "sin-centric" gospel which has turned the faith into, in his words, "a pessimistic, evil-obsessed religion of sin management." And Rob Bell tells us that Jesus' gospel never made "claims about one religion being better than all other religions." Instead, Bell writes, following Jesus is "the best possible way to live."

Some on the left wing of the "emerging church" spend an awful lot of time telling us that Christianity is about more than a collection of doctrines, and I agree. Some of them insist, loudly, that the gospel is about more than "going to heaven when you die" and that the kingdom of God addresses the whole of life, and again, I agree. The problem is that these teachers often seem to be doing more than speaking about the "more" of the gospel of the kingdom that some evangelicals miss; that is, they downplay the

historic core of the good news of the kingdom—an announcement about Jesus that is a historical reality of incarnation, atonement, and triumph and an announcement about us that says, "Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3).

Too often, the doctrinal left wing of the "emerging" movement isn't clarifying the doctrinal content of Christianity, but using, it seems, cunning words to downplay this doctrinal content in order to substitute a social program there instead. This can—and has—happened on the political right as well as on the political left, and with the same kind of wreckage left in its wake.

Ultimately, the social gospel of the early twentieth century was self-defeating, and I predict the same for any reincarnation of it. Without that which makes Christianity unique—the scandal of the cross—people will keep the social program but substitute a religion, whether secular or pagan, that better allows them to "continue in sin that grace may abound." This is why those groups that embraced the social gospel last century are now burned-over shells of previously Christian conviction.

The social gospels of yesterday and today are correct that an isolationist, separatist Christianity fails to see the wholeness of kingdom salvation. They are right that "apolitical" churches or Christian movements are typically the most political of all—in supporting the status quo (think, for instance, of those "simple gospel preaching" churches of the Jim Crow South). They are wrong, though, in seeing the jettisoning of personal sin, personal redemption, and personal reconciliation as the way to redeem a kingdom identity.

THE HISTORIC GOSPEL: COSMIC AND PERSONAL

The gospel of historic Christianity is cosmic. In Jesus, God reconciles "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). That means we must be concerned, as Jesus is, with the whole of human experience, recognizing the curse of sin in human suffering as well as in human guilt.

But the gospel of historic Christianity is also personal. We love our fellow humans and serve them in their suffering precisely because we believe that God loves not just "humanity" but individual humans, that Jesus died for persons, that God's wrath is propitiated against persons, and that persons will be raised, individually and collectively, in the flesh on the last day.

Any "gospel" that evacuates the cross of judgment against sin, that alienates the gospel from personal reconciliation with God and with others, is something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. And any Christianity that turns us away from the truths handed down about Jesus—his deity, his humanity, virgin birth, his suffering at Golgotha, his bodily resurrection, his future return, his authority in Scripture, his building of the church—is pointing us to some different Messiah.

Let's remember that the gospel is social but the social gospel isn't good news. And a church that embraces it, "emerging" or otherwise, will not long be a church.

So let's speak truth to power, even as John the Baptist did to King Herod (and sometimes with the same results). Let's feed the poor, house the homeless, adopt the orphan, shelter the widow, advocate for the unborn, and respect the environment. But, most importantly, let's preach peace and justice, for the individual and for the whole world, found in the bloody cross and empty tomb of Jesus.

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What Lessons Can We Learn from the History of Liberalism?
By Gregory A. Wills

Evangelicalism today is well positioned for a new liberal departure. There is a widespread sense of crisis among evangelicals. We sense that something has gone wrong with the church, not least because the church seems irrelevant to the persons we are trying to reach with the gospel. Christianity seems to have lost all credit in society. These are the same conditions from which the old liberalism emerged.

Liberalism is a heresy of evangelicalism. Evangelicals often miss this point. We rightly view liberalism as destructive to the gospel and the church, but we mistake the results of liberalism for its intentions. We consequently look for liberalism in the wrong places, among those who are outside the evangelical camp, and are confused when it instead appears within the citadel of the church itself. We are confused because we misapprehend the character of liberalism. We identify liberals as persons who reject the Bible, the church, and Jesus. However, such persons are not liberals. Liberals have always made it their first ambition to honor the Bible, the church, and Jesus. Liberalism does not originate from without the church but from within.

LIBERALS' PROBLEM: CHRISTIANITY'S LACK OF CREDIBILITY

The old liberalism was a response to attacks on the credibility of Christianity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European scholars subjected the Bible to scientific—that is, naturalistic—historical criticism. Historical science concluded that many parts of the Bible were not what they claimed to be. Many parts of the Bible were written much later than they claimed, and were littered with fables and fanciful accounts. Scholarship thus discredited Christianity. In response to the church's loss of credibility, Friedrich Schleiermacher initiated the liberal movement when he proposed that the church itself was to blame. Schleiermacher believed that the church's preoccupation with dogma and law was foreign to its original character. Since its true character inhered in the experience of the relationship between dependent creatures and the infinite God, it could suffer the criticism of its traditional doctrine and ethics without any true loss to Christianity itself.

A more devastating attack on Christianity's credibility arose in 1859 from Charles Darwin's arguments for the evolution of all living organisms, which gained wide acceptance among intellectuals. Darwin advanced a naturalistic explanation of the origin of the species that seemed to contradict the Bible's assertion that God created them in manifold array. If Darwin was right, then the Bible was wrong. Christianity now stood discredited by science.

For many orthodox Christians, these developments brought about a personal crisis. If they wanted to retain their faith in the Bible, they would have to reject scientific discoveries in history and biology. If they wanted to accept the science, they would have to reject the Bible.

But for many Christian leaders, the missiological aspect of the crisis was more compelling than the personal aspect. Educated persons did not merely reject Christianity as untrue; they also scorned it as disreputable and absurd. Based on evolutionary thinking, intellectuals increasingly concluded that Christianity, like religion generally, belonged to the childhood of the human race. But now that humanity had reached its majority it would stand upon enlightened and scientific reason, and would discard its religious superstitions.

As a result, by around 1900 the church was facing its most perilous intellectual crisis since the second century. Liberalism developed as a response to this crisis. Liberalism's fundamental purpose was to save the Bible and the church from the attacks of scientific naturalism. It would save the faith by purging it of the philosophical and superstitious impurities that well-meaning theologians had imposed upon it over the centuries. It was time to reform the church and return to Christ. Liberalism would restore the intellectual and moral credit of Jesus, the Bible, and the church in modern society.

LIBERALS' SOLUTION: A NEW VIEW OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

Liberals' solution was to develop a middle way between scientific naturalism and traditional orthodoxy, a way that would affirm both the new science and the Bible. The key to this solution was a new view of biblical inspiration.

Although evangelicals have often misrepresented liberals at this point, liberals did not reject the inspiration of the Bible. We accused them of "rejecting the Bible" because liberals rejected or redefined many fundamental beliefs of traditional orthodoxy, because logical consistency seemed to require liberals to reject the entire Bible, and because we wanted to emphasize the grave danger that liberalism posed. But in fact their program stood on the premise that the Bible was inspired and authoritative.

Liberals in fact knew that Christianity was true. They knew it in their hearts. They were raised in evangelical churches. They experienced conversion and gave their lives to the service of Jesus. They accepted the Bible as their standard of belief and conduct. Their conversion, their prayers, and their Bible reading shaped their identity, defined their purpose, and gave meaning to their lives. They would not—they could not—abandon their faith or the Bible that revealed and shaped it.

As traditionally interpreted, however, the Bible stood discredited by the new science. It asserted that God created humans by a direct and sudden act, and that he created the vast array of plant and animal species in same way. But Darwinism had allegedly proved that God did not create the species by a direct act. The Bible also asserted that God gave the laws concerning sacrifice and worship at Mt. Sinai upon Israel's exodus from Egypt. But historical criticism had now allegedly proved that these laws did not develop until hundreds of years after the exodus.

Most evangelicals rejected the premises and conclusions of Darwinism and historical criticism and retained a traditional view of the Bible's inspiration and meaning. Some, however, accepted the new science and rejected the Bible: that is, they abandoned Christianity. Liberals offered a third way. They accepted the science but did not reject the Bible. But they had to square the Bible with the science. To accomplish this they developed a new theory of inspiration.

The Bible's inspiration, liberals proposed, guaranteed the truth of its religious message but did not guarantee the truth of its historical message. The Bible's historical statements could thus be discounted if proven improbable. This did not mean that they were uninspired. They had a religious or spiritual meaning that did not depend on the veracity of the historical meaning. The historical form of the message served as a vehicle to deliver the religious message. The vital meaning should not be confused with the vehicle. The inspired kernel of religious truth was hidden beneath the human husk of historical statement. Since the Bible was inspired in its religious meaning only, a passage could be true religiously but false historically. Liberals held that the scientific discoveries did not falsify the Bible, they merely corrected false views of inspiration.

Their confidence that they were merely following the dictates of rational science prevented most liberals from recognizing that their approach involved cultural accommodation of vast proportions. Karl Barth's critique in the early twentieth century helped many recognize this fact, but there could be no going back to traditional orthodoxy. As long as they remained convinced of the validity of Darwinism and historical criticism, liberals' view of inspiration offered the only plausible way to preserve a place for the Bible and for Jesus Christ in the modern world. The old orthodoxy was no longer credible in light of modern science.

The old liberalism sought to rescue Christianity by making it credible to persons who had adopted a naturalistic worldview, which meant redefining Christianity in largely naturalistic terms. Liberals were convinced that they could preserve the transcendent spiritual truth—supernatural truth—on this basis. They were wrong. They intended to rescue the faith, but in making Christianity more credible to the world, they replaced it with a religion according to the world.

WE FACE THE SAME DILEMMA TODAY

Evangelicals today find themselves in a similar place. Many evangelical scholars find the historical critical arguments of the old liberals compelling, though they generally stop short of their conclusions. Others are proposing new ways of accepting evolution without rejecting the Bible. Most important, many evangelicals today sense that the old orthodoxy is not particularly compelling. The church's message is no longer credible to the educated, intelligent, and cultured classes. It stands discredited in the light of modern culture.

Modern evangelicals who wish to remove Christianity's discredit among its cultured despisers are retracing the steps of the old liberals. If the history of liberalism has proved anything, surely it has proved that the gospel must be accepted on its own terms, not on the terms of its despisers, however cultured, educated, and successful they may be.

If evangelicals prove unable to bear the scorn and reproach of cultured unbelievers, then we will attempt to construct another mediating Christianity that aspires to save the church and its message from its cultural crisis. The new liberalism, however, will fare no better than the old—its fundamental aim and its critical principles will devour its content until there is little left of its message. Its children will not find its message or its community compelling, and will not identify with it. But for one or two generations, it will lead millions astray and do permanent damage to the church and the advance of the gospel.

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Who Exactly Are the Evangelicals?
By Michael Horton

It feels like a renewed storm, or at least a squall, has been gathering around the term "evangelical" lately. More and more self-described evangelicals are realizing that not everyone believes the same things, even about the core doctrines. In response, some have begun to write manifestos which attempt to re-articulate the characteristics of an evangelical identity. Others are authoring books and holding conferences which aim to re-center the movement as a whole. Still others have decided it's best to pitch the term altogether and call themselves "post-evangelicals."

But the problem is hardly new. It's never been easy to determine who the evangelicals are because evangelicalism has always been a diverse movement. Luther wanted his followers to be called "evangelicals," meaning gospel-people (it was his enemies who nicknamed his followers "Lutheran"). The other branch of the Reformation was also happy to share the evangelical designation (the orthodox Lutherans coined the term "Calvinists" as a way of distinguishing Reformed views of the Lord's Supper from their own). Then, with the advent of the pietism and revivalism, the label "evangelical" went in all sorts of directions. Today, it's such an ambiguous moniker that some historians find the best definition to be George Marsden's: "anybody who likes Billy Graham."

Yet with just a little bit of historical perspective, it's not difficult to see why such storms, or squalls, are perennial: the evangel is forever becoming separated from the evangelicals, which is exactly why it's so hard to know who the evangelicals are.

PIETISM AND REVIVALISM

The term "evangelical" moved into common use during the Reformation in an effort to clarify and proclaim the gospel. Anglican, Presbyterian, and Continental followers of Bucer, Calvin, Knox, and Beza also liked the term "Reformed" because their goal was not to start a new church or denomination, but to reform the historic church. Still, Lutheran and Reformed churches, in spite of their important differences, stood shoulder to shoulder in defending the gospel from distortions from both Rome and the Anabaptists.

The advent of pietism and revivalism, however, complicated matters. At first, pietism was a reform movement within these Lutheran and Reformed churches, encouraging a deeper connection between doctrine and piety. Eventually, however, pietism began to look more like Anabaptist spirituality. Revivalism (British and American) also pushed pietism further away from its Reformation roots.

A crucial price of admission to the evangelical camp even in the First Great Awakening was being pro-revival. Many Lutheran and Reformed ministers were ambivalent about the very idea of expecting seasons of revival, suspecting it of harboring a low view of the ordinary ministry of the church. But by the Second Great Awakening, there was no question. The focus shifted from an emphasis on God's saving work in Christ through God's ordained means to an emphasis on human decisions and efforts through pragmatic methods and "excitements." The major personality behind the second awakening, Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), even rejected the doctrines of original sin, substitutionary atonement, justification through faith alone, and the supernatural character of the new birth.

The Second Great Awakening, represented by Finney, created a system of faith and practice tailor made for a self-reliant nation. Evangelicalism—which is to say, late eighteenth-century American Protestantism—was an engine for innovations. In doctrine, it served modernity's preference for faith in human nature and progress. In worship, it transformed Word-and-Sacrament ministry into entertainment and social reform and created the first star system in the culture of celebrity. In public life, it confused the kingdom of Christ with the kingdoms of this world and imagined that Christ's reign could be made visible by the moral, social, and political activity of the saints. There was little room for anything weighty to tie the movement down, to discipline its entrepreneurial celebrities, or to question its "revivals" apart from their often short-lived publicity.

Somewhere along the way the evangel became separated from evangelism; the message became subservient to the methods. American religion was becoming worthy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's eventual characterization: "Protestantism without the Reformation."[1]

"Extremes meet," noted Princeton's B. B. Warfield toward the end of the nineteenth-century about the conservative pietists and liberal rationalists. "Pietist and Rationalist have ever hunted in couples and dragged down their quarry together. They may differ as to why they deem theology mere lumber, and would not have the prospective minister waste his time in acquiring it. The one loves God so much, the other loves him so little, that he does not care to know him."[2]

Warfield's Dutch colleague Herman Bavinck observed, "Powerful movements, like those that Pietism had called forth in Germany and Methodism had unleashed in England and America, all had in common that they shifted the center of gravity from the object of religion to the subject. Theology followed this track in the systems produced by Kant, Schleiermacher, and their schools."[3] The educated wing of pietistic Protestantism in America tended to become assimilated to modernism, while its fundamentalist wing provided an ever-fresh crop of cynical and disillusioned young people to find the former a more attractive option. Yet modernists like Harry Emerson Fosdick and fundamentalists like Bob Jones, Sr. could recall Finney and his legacy with fondness.

THE REFORMATION STREAM

However, the Reformation stream in American evangelicalism hadn't dried up completely. Old Princeton was an especially fecund source for renewing and defending the legacy of true evangelicalsm. Lutherans like C. F. W. Walther, Presbyterians like Archibald Alexander, Congregationalists like Timothy Dwight, Episcopalians like Bishop William White, and Baptists like Isaac Backus could recognize a core of Reformation convictions that they shared in common, over against the rising tide of infidelity. Much good came (and still comes) out of evangelical cooperation on the mission field, in common diaconal ministries, and in faithful scholarship.

Churchmen like Warfield and Hodge regarded themselves as evangelicals in the distinctively Reformation sense and struggled to bring American Protestantism into line with this definition. They were also staunchly committed to and personally involved with the vast missionary endeavors of their denomination at home and abroad, bringing them into constant fellowship and cooperation with other evangelicals.

Nevertheless, Warfield was already beginning to see that the tension between competing visions of evangelical identity was making it more difficult to remain an unqualified supporter of the evangelical cause. In 1920, a number of evangelicals put forward a "plan of union for evangelical churches." Warfield evaluated the "creed" of this plan, as it was being studied by Presbyterians, and observed that the new confession being proposed "contains nothing which is not believed by Evangelicals," and yet "…nothing which is not believed …by the adherents of the Church of Rome, for example." He wrote,

> There is nothing about justification by faith in this creed. And that means that all the gains obtained in that great religious movement which we call the Reformation are cast out of with window…There is nothing about the atonement in the blood of Christ in this creed. And that means that the whole gain of the long mediaeval search after truth is thrown summarily aside…There is nothing about sin and grace in this creed…We need not confess our sins anymore; we need not recognize the existence of such a thing. We need believe in the Holy Spirit only 'as guide and comforter'—do not the Rationalists do the same? And this means that all the gain the whole world has reaped from the great Augustinian conflict goes out of the window with the rest…It is just as true that the gains of the still earlier debates which occupied the first age of the Church's life, through which we attained to the understanding of the fundamental truths of the Trinity and the Deity of Christ are discarded by this creed also. There is no Trinity in this creed; no Deity of Christ—or of the Holy Spirit.[4]

If justification through faith is the heart of the evangel, Warfield wondered, how can "evangelicals" omit it from their common confession? He asked, "Is this the kind of creed which twentieth-century

Presbyterianism will find sufficient as a basis for co-operation in evangelistic activities? Then it can get along in its evangelistic activities without the gospel. For it is precisely the gospel that this creed neglects altogether." Again, the evangel had become separated from the evangelicals. "'Fellowship' is a good word," Warfield concluded, "and a great duty. But our fellowship, according to Paul, must be in 'the furtherance of the gospel.'"[5]

The diagnosis of American Christianity offered by Dietrich Bonhoeffer ("Protestantism without the Reformation") after his lecture tour in the United States seems justified. He wrote,

> God has granted American Christianity no Reformation. He has given it strong revivalist preachers, churchmen and theologians, but no Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ by the Word of God….American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of 'criticism' by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last they do not understand that God's 'criticism' touches even religion, the Christianity of the church and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics….In American theology, Christianity is still essentially religion and ethics…Because of this the person and work of Christ must, for theology, sink into the background and in the long run remain misunderstood, because it is not recognized as the sole ground of radical judgment and radical forgiveness.[6]

WHERE IS EVANGELICALISM TODAY?

Today, some of the ill fruit of pietism and revivalism live on. Many take it for granted that those who are most concerned about doctrine are least interested in reaching the lost (or, as they are now called, the "unchurched"). Evangelicals are frequently challenged to choose between being *traditional* or *missional*, two camps which are typically described with nothing more than caricatures. Where the earlier evangelical consensus coalesced simultaneously around getting the gospel right and getting it out, increasingly today the coalition is defined by its style ("contemporary" versus "traditional"), its politics ("compassionate conservatism" or the more recent rediscovery of revivalism's progressivist roots), and its rock star leaders, rather than for its convictions about God, humanity, sin, salvation, the purpose of history, and the last judgment.

I realize that not all such "creeds" today are as minimalistic as the one evaluated by Warfield. Nor has American Christianity been without its own defenders of the faith. In its statement of faith the National Association of Evangelicals affirms the Trinity, the deity of Christ, "the vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood," and the necessity of a supernatural rebirth. However, there is no mention of justification—the article of a standing or falling church—and the only conviction concerning the church is belief in "the spiritual unity of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ." Baptism and the Supper are not even mentioned.

Ironically, genuinely evangelical faith today is often found outside of the evangelical movement, and within evangelicalism it is contested on many fronts. Increasingly, it has become common for evangelicals to question the authority (much less the sufficiency) of Scripture and the basic tenets around which evangelicals of various stripes were formerly able to unite. According to every major survey I've seen, most American evangelicals are ignorant of many of the basic truths of Christianity. Instead, there is a pervasive "moralistic, therapeutic deism," as sociologist Christian Smith has documented. The fact that people growing up in evangelical churches are as likely—and in some studies, *more* likely—to embrace this sort of amorphous spirituality over against the Christian creed makes you wonder what is "evangelical" about "evangelicalism." Has the evangel left the evangelicals?

At the same time, one often encounters winsome defenses of historic Christianity, including the Reformation's insights, from what might have seemed like the most unlikely sources.

A VILLAGE GREEN

For all of this, I remain convinced that there is still a place for being "evangelical." Why? Quite simply, because we still have the evangel. In my view, evangelicalism, then, serves best as a "village green," like the common parks at the center of old New England towns, for everyone who affirms this evangel. It's a place where Christians from different churches meet to discuss what they share in common, as well as their differences. They help keep each other honest.

In its present phase, the church is a pilgrim people. I think that the Reformed confession is the most faithful summary of the Bible's teachings. Yet my faith is enriched by encountering Christians from different traditions who challenge me to think more deeply and fully about emphases I might have missed.

The village green also provides a common area where Christians can witness to non-Christians concerning the hope that they share, and a common space where our neighbors in a particular community can be served by Christian love. The danger comes when the village green becomes dominated by a nearly Pelagian atmosphere and self-confidently imagines that its Big Tent is the cathedral that reduces actual churches on the green to mere chapels.

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without the Reformation," in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 92-118
[2] B. B. Warfield, "Our Seminary Curriculum," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—I*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), 371
[3] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 556
[4] B. B. Warfield, "In Behalf of Evangelical Religion," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—I*, 386
5 Ibid., 387
[6] Bonhoeffer, op. cit.

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More Than a Feeling: The Emotions and Christian Devotion
By D. G. Hart

Evangelicals love emotions. They evaluate church services based on whether or not they provide a transcendent experience. They chastise preachers for being too dry or heady because they want someone who speaks from the heart. They value authenticity and sincerity and abhor anything resembling formalism.

But this isn't the first time in history evangelicals have so valued the emotions.

A HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

One of the ironies of twentieth-century American Protestantism is that renowned scholar J. Gresham Machen, the leading voice of conservative Presbyterians during the tumultuous decades of the 1920s and 1930s and a staunch defender of historic Protestantism, mustered only a very small group of conservative Presbyterians to join him in founding the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936.

Why did Machen win so few followers? The answer lies, at least in part, in the fact that many evangelicals of his day wrongly valued emotions over doctrine, which left them at least partially insensitive to his charges against liberalism.

Many church members in Machen's own communion, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., failed to be persuaded by his arguments because other evangelicals in the church did not regard liberalism as a threat. For these evangelicals, empathy and zeal for Christ were indications of genuine religion. Since liberals often exhibited this kind of emotional attachment to Christ and Scripture, the evangelicals assumed they could not be the threat that Machen alleged.

By the same token, these same evangelicals did not treat doctrine or formal expressions of Christian truth as reliable guides to Christian devotion. After all, a person could affirm the Nicene Creed, it was observed, and still not be a true Christian. A better way to discern whether someone was truly devoted to Christ was to consider his or her love and experience with Christ, not his or her ability to explain Christ's deity or the significance of the crucifixion. As long as pastors, missionaries, or church officers displayed the right emotion, they could be regarded as sound. Critiquing their faith was a form of character assassination.

Yet these evangelicals failed to engage a fundamental point in Machen's critique. Machen contended that liberalism misidentified the relationship between doctrine and feeling. Liberals regarded creeds and doctrines as the product of Christian experience. As such, they considered the truth or falsity of a sermon or church decision to be less important than whether the person giving the sermon or the committee responsible for the decision had the right feelings and the best intentions. Machen, on the other hand, believed that Christian experience should flow from the truth conveyed by doctrine, so that the subjective aspects of faith were rooted in the objective. As Machen argued, "if religion consists merely in feeling the presence of God, it is devoid of any moral quality whatever."[1] He added that if Christian experience was the basis for truth in the church, "how shall the findings of the Christian consciousness be established?" One option was to put all matters before the church to a majority vote. But because the individual experience of Christians was "endlessly diverse" the church could never have unanimity on any point of faith and practice.[2] In short, liberals had an unhealthy regard for human emotion over and against Christian truths. Machen rightly saw that this not only destroyed Christian truth, but also made Christian unity and fellowship impossible.

THE ONGOING TENSION

Some conservative Protestants today may agree with Machen's point regarding liberalism, but they do not regard the liberal overemphasis on emotions as a threat that they face, since, by and large, evangelicals love their Lord and seek to honor and serve him. But, as historical theologian Carl Trueman has pointed out, such a response to the problem Machen noted would be short sighted. Trueman detects

a Schleiermacherian emphasis on feeling and emotions among contemporary evangelical Protestants—that is, an undeservedly high estimate of experience in relation to Scripture and doctrine. Trueman detects this imbalance particularly in current discussions about evangelical worship. Any attempt, he writes, to make "human psychology and human experience the basis of worship" will ultimately distort the truth of Christianity, the character of Christian devotion, and even the church's ability to communicate across cultures. "Let's focus on the simple, straightforward *message* of reconciliation in Christ," Trueman exhorts, "not our own experiences of church or whatever, as the core of our church worship."[3]

This tension between emotions (subjective) and doctrine (objective) is nothing new. At the time of the Reformation, some Protestants objected to formal standards for worship and fellowship because they believed the Holy Spirit's work was so strong among them that such norms were actually barriers to authentic Christianity. Although the magisterial Reformation safeguarded Protestantism from the dangers of such a view, the priority of emotions over doctrine resurfaced again at the time of the First Great Awakening in both Great Britain and the English colonies in North America. Incautious proponents of revivalism stressed the importance and efficacy of the conversion experience—and geared services to produce these experiences—to such an extent that many Protestant communions split between those who emphasized the immediate experience of the Spirit (pro-revival) and those who insisted that experience could not be divorced from right doctrine and faithful practice (anti-revival). Thanks to moderate positions like those advanced by Jonathan Edwards, who attempted to distinguish genuine from spurious "religious affections," evangelicals emerged from the First Great Awakening with a commitment to the importance of both the objective and subjective.

HOW ARE WE TO RIGHTLY REGARD THE EMOTIONS?

What then is the proper balance between the objective and the subjective? How are Christians to rightly regard the emotions? In brief, we should understand that the subjective depends on the objective. Right emotions depend on, and derive from, sound doctrine.

Yet, evangelical Protestants have been in continuing danger of construing the relationship between experience and doctrine in a way that puts emotions on the same level as biblical instruction. It is relatively easy to see why. Evangelical Protestants always want to avoid the error of formalism or nominalism, that is, the danger of simply going through the motions of Christianity. For too many Christians, the logic goes, reading the Bible, reciting a creed, singing a hymn, or going to church is too easy and so is an unreliable indication of the posture of a person's heart toward Christ. What turns Christian formalities into genuine expressions of faith, evangelicals argue, is a heart that is "on fire" for the truths conveyed in the religious forms of devotion. This understanding of the relationship between experience and doctrine (or other formal expressions such as listening to a sermon or partaking of the Lord's Supper) can easily turn into an affirmation of the priority of emotions. Only after a believer clears the hurdle of experience can the believer move on to formal teachings or practices that bear fruit.

Of course, the danger of this way of understanding the objective and subjective sides of Christian faith is exactly what Machen warned against. Over time, the import of experience becomes so one-sided that the objective marks of Christianity—teaching, worship, and rightly ordered churches—take a back seat to good intentions that spring from a right emotional regard for Christ. Proponents of experiential Christianity rarely see that emotions can easily turn into sentiment. When this happens, the believer's feelings for Christianity are disproportionate to the person's understanding of the object to which he or she is emotionally tied.

One way to illustrate this problem is to consider love in marriage. A man may love his wife or he may be in love with the feeling of being in love. Too often the desire for the feeling of being in love leads men to look for new romances. The emotions generated by another woman convince him that the old attachment to his wife is no longer true. Of course, evangelical Protestants would say that such feelings are illegitimate and that love for one's wife actually matures over the course of a marriage, so that the love is still "true" even if it does not run red hot with emotion. A husband's love for his wife must take more ordinary or routine forms than the rush of emotion that accompanies wooing and courtship.

A similar dynamic is at work in the lives of Christians. The first flush of trusting in Christ becomes ordinary and routine over time as one matures in the faith and as the practices of personal devotion, family worship, and corporate worship become familiar and habitual. One way to maintain a proper balance between the objective and subjective aspects of Christian faith is to cultivate ordinary, routine expressions of emotion in the same way that husbands and wives do throughout their marriages. This means that a Christian worshiper on any given Sunday may not be moved to the brink of ecstasy, yet he or she can still express genuine love and devotion to Christ. In other words, intense emotions are not always the best measure of Christian experience.

Another important factor in balancing the objective and subjective aspects of Christian faith is to recognize that Christian experience arises from truth. Emotions proceeds from doctrine, not the other way around. This is a lesson Machen tried to teach the church of his day. He appealed to the example of the apostle Paul, who told Christians in Philippi that no matter what the motives of the preacher, as long as the gospel was proclaimed he "rejoiced" (Phil 1:18). As Machen argued, Paul was far more concerned about the doctrine that was preached than the experience or emotions that went into the preaching.[4]

To be sure, an emphasis on the objective aspects of Christianity can lead to the neglect of genuine zeal for Christ, just as an emphasis on experience can breed indifference to the content of the Christian message. But the ultimate solution to this tension does not depend upon Christians striking the balance just right, but upon the Holy Spirit's work. He alone can create a clean heart characterized by godly emotions. And the particular means which God has promised to bless with the presence of his Spirit are those that rightly declare the good news of Christ and the salvation he has made possible through his death and resurrection.

Thus, the role of emotions in the Christian life find their proper place when the church acknowledges that salvation begins and ends with God.

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[1] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 54.
[2] Ibid., 78.
[3] Carl R. Trueman, *The Wages of Spin* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications), 74.
[4] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 22.

January/February 2010

Evangelism and Social Action: A Tale of Two Trajectories
By Bobby Jamieson

Contemporary evangelicals are particularly susceptible to thinking that *we*, at last, have finally discovered some earth-shaking, paradigm-shifting truth that has been hidden beneath two thousand years of Christian ignorance. Conversely, some of us who prefer not to shoulder the burden of novelty present our agendas as a recovery of some truly ancient, even apostolic doctrine or practice. Yet even the most cursory stroll through the halls of history will often reveal these common claims of discovery and recovery to be ill-informed at best. It may be that what we thought was a brand new discovery has been articulated by scores of thoughtful Christians since Augustine, or was actually condemned as heresy sixteen centuries ago. It may be that what we're calling a recovery doesn't quite have the historical pedigree we hoped for, whether because historical precedent is scarce or because those who advocated our views aren't exactly the guys we want in our corner in a theological debate. If Pelagius, Socinus and Finney all agree with you, that doesn't *necessarily* mean that you're wrong, but it should make you uneasy.

One current group of evangelicals who are offering fairly constant claims of discovery and recovery are those who believe that the church's mission includes social justice and caring for the poor, not merely evangelism and discipleship. While leading voices calling for renewed attention to social justice and the poor may not present their case in either of the admittedly extreme molds I outline above, they are quite self-consciously calling evangelicals to change, to recalibrate our mission—in other words, to either do something *new* or recover something old that we've lost. As such it is not irrelevant to ask, "Have we had this conversation before?"

SOCIAL ACTION AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION: WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

One needn't stroll too long through the halls of history in order to discover that we have. In fact, this debate was central to evangelical conversations about evangelism and the church's mission in the 1960's and 70's, as Arthur Johnston's book *The Battle For World Evangelism* (Tyndale, 1978) amply demonstrates.

In this work, Johnston, who was a missionary to France, founder of The Alliance of Independent Evangelical Churches in France, and later the chairman of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, "focuses upon three main subjects" (17). First, he "attempts to show what is the evangelical message of the Gospel in contrast to the 'social gospel' of the earlier decades of this century, to the 'larger evangelism' of Madras…1938 and to the 'holistic evangelism' of this decade," that is, the 1970's (17). Second, Johnston argues that "the World Congress on Evangelism of 1966 held in Berlin represents a continuity in evangelism that has its roots in the New Testament as well" (18). In other words, Johnston believes that the initial evangelical response to the ecumenical movement's evangelism conferences was both biblical and historically evangelical. Third, Johnston examines "the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne, Switzerland." Of particular concern to Johnston is "the new understanding of the mission of the church. Historically the mission of the church is evangelism alone…The author is concerned that the redefinition of the mission of the church will distract from historic evangelical evangelism and, thereby, diminish *both* world evangelism and the by-products of evangelism in social and political spheres of life in this world" (18-19).

Although Johnston lists these subjects as three discrete topics, one could accurately summarize his work in terms of two trajectories, one ecumenical and the other evangelical. The ecumenical agenda began in earnest, Johnston argues, at Edinburgh in 1910, and continued through the conferences sponsored by or affiliated with the World Council of Churches from the 1940's to the 1970's. The evangelical trajectory, on the other hand, emerged in force at the Berlin Congress on Evangelism in 1966 and extended through the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland and the ongoing work of the Lausanne Continuation Committee, which was later renamed the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization.

THE ECUMENICAL TRAJECTORY

Johnston argues that the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 marked a serious departure from historic evangelical evangelism and initiated a trajectory which culminated not long after in the loss of the gospel itself. Johnston asserts that those who led Edinburgh 1910 had adopted a looser, more modern view of biblical inspiration, a more inclusive theological platform, and an openness "to progressive theology and syncretism" (46). And according to Johnston, over the next several decades, in various institutional manifestations, this ecumenical movement pursued a theological trajectory of "larger evangelism" and "holistic evangelism" which eventually led to a wholesale loss of the gospel. Over time, the ecumenical movement embraced an increasingly explicit universalism which resulted in understanding evangelism to be a proclamation of what is already true about every human person and in elevating social concern to a place of dominant importance in the mission of the church.

But for our purposes, what is especially interesting about this ecumenical trajectory is not just how it got from Point A to Point B, but the specific language its proponents used to describe the gospel and the mission of the church. Consider what a group of Anglicans at the 1949 Study Conference on Evangelism at Bossey, Switzerland reportedly advocated:

What is envisaged is a real encounter with the cultural and social structure and situation of the world, in give, but certainly also in take, evolving in this encounter a new idiom for expressing the Christian faith, a prophetic witness of the biblical interpretation of history, of the meaning of human life, and of the Church as community…The aim has to be more to win men for the 'obedience in the world' than to win them for the Church. The Church has to enter in such a way in the life of the world that it becomes incarnated in it. (101-102)

Despite the archaic language, this sounds more than a little like current missional thinking about the church, except that the report goes on to say how these Anglicans found little room for evangelism as defined by verbal proclamation of the gospel, preferring instead to gives answers "to the burning questions of the world" (102).

A defining feature of this trajectory of ecumenical evangelism is the desire for a "larger" evangelism, a "holistic" evangelism that addresses not merely men's souls, but their bodies, not merely individual men but the structures of society. This "larger" and "holistic" evangelism construed salvation not merely in terms of eternal life in heaven, but in terms of "*shalom* upon the earth" (117). Thus "mission" was to be understood not merely as proclamation but also as "presence" (176); according to the new "larger" evangelism, therefore, the church's mission was to address structural injustice, care for the poor, and bring God's *shalom* to bear on society every bit as much as it was to preach the gospel and make disciples.

Yet the gospel the ecumenicals preached barely resembled the biblical gospel. According to Johnston, this new ecumenical theology of evangelism and mission was built upon a low view of biblical inspiration and a Barth-inspired incarnational universalism which taught that all people have already been reconciled to God and will finally be saved. Evangelism, then, was merely inviting people to experience and realize what they already possess. Man's state of lostness, far from being a state of condemnation under God, was redefined as a "lack of involvement in his earthly inheritance" (117).

The ecumenical trajectory in a nutshell? It departed from understanding the church's mission as strictly evangelism and discipleship and elevated social concern as an equally constitutive component of the church's mission; and, it moved from affirming the good news about Christ to preaching an eviscerated, universalistic imposter of the biblical gospel.

THE EVANGELICAL TRAJECTORY

The evangelical trajectory emerged as a response to these developments in the ecumenical movement. Once the International Missionary Council (whose theology is described above) was officially integrated into the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961, evangelicals began to make plans to offer a unified answer to this now thoroughly compromised ecumenical evangelistic agenda. After several years

of planning, the World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin in 1966 presented to the world a unified evangelical vision of missions in explicit contrast with the ecumenical agenda. The presenters at the Berlin Congress articulated solidly evangelical views on the authority of Scripture, the nature of evangelism as verbal proclamation of the good news about Christ, the reality of God's judgment against sinners, and the need for people to repent and believe in Christ in order to be saved.

Yet there was one crucial topic which the Berlin Congress failed to adequately address: the World Council of Churches' redefinition of mission. Johnston writes, "Berlin 1966 also struggled…with the redefinition of the word 'mission' by the WCC theologians…*The* 'mission' became primarily the restructuring of society and 'evangelism' became primarily the means toward this accomplishment" (176). While several presenters at the Berlin Congress engaged this issue, the Congress as a whole did not articulate a unified and decisive response to it. Hence, "Lausanne 1974 would address itself again to this issue and attempt to reconcile the 'insights' of nonevangelicals into the theology of evangelicalism. The regional Minneapolis 1969 Congress, caught in the midst of the Vietnam conflict and in racial and economic inequities, failed to discern the WCC redefinition of mission because of Berlin's *lacuna* in this area" (176).

Enter John Stott. Stott delivered the opening Bible Study address at Lausanne 1974, was the lead author of its covenant, and generally charted the course of Lausanne's response to the WCC redefinition of mission. Back at Berlin in 1966, Stott exhorted evangelicals to love, serve, and identify with those whom they evangelized, yet he believed that such deeds of love were not "an integral partner with evangelism in the mission of the church" (302). Rather, "at Berlin 1966 he argued that the cumulative emphasis of the Great Commission texts was on preaching, witnessing, and making disciples," such that "one could conclude from his exposition that the mission of the church is 'exclusively a preaching, converting and teaching mission'" (301-302).

Yet at Lausanne in 1974, Stott's theology of evangelism took a drastic new turn. In his opening address "The Biblical Basis of Evangelism," Stott explained his new views in contrast to what he espoused at Berlin:

> Today, however, I would express myself differently. It is not just that the commission includes a duty to teach converts everything Jesus had previously commanded (Matthew 28:20), (sic) and that social responsibility is among the things which Jesus commanded. I now see more clearly that not only the consequences of the commission but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus. (302)

Stott would express himself similarly in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, which was published the following year by IVP:

> This brings me to the third way of stating the relation between evangelism and social action, which I believe to be the truly Christian one, namely that social action is *a partner of evangelism*. As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love. As the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele put it in 1967 'Evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God.' (para. 2.20). (27)

If this sounds like the definition of mission advanced by the ecumenical movement, that's because it is. Throughout his address Stott cites the various statements produced by the recent ecumenical congresses as the sources for his new way of thinking. He also explicitly recognizes that this definition of mission is a new "development" brought about by the WCC movement, yet he sees "no reason why we should resist" it (301).

In other words, Stott took the ecumenical definition of mission, which derived from a universalistic theology, and attempted to transplant it into evangelical soil. It should be noted that Stott presented his views as a synthesis of the entrenched evangelical and ecumenical extremes (see his *Christian Mission*

in the Modern World, 15-21). Yet in elevating social action to the status of an equal partner with evangelism, he adopted the essential premises of the position the ecumenicals had articulated for several decades.

The Lausanne covenant bears some marks of Stott's redefinition of mission, though it stops short of asserting that evangelism and social action are equal partners in the church's mission. For example, in point six, "The Church and Evangelism," the Covenant reads, "In the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary" (373). Here the covenant appears to split the difference between the historic evangelical understanding of the church's mission and Stott's redefinition of the same. Evangelism is still "primary," but the church's mission is construed as "sacrificial service," which, following Stott's interpretation of the mission of Jesus as one of "service" to the whole man, embraces social action and caring for the poor (302).

While the Lausanne Covenant doesn't explicitly embrace Stott's redefinition of mission, the Lausanne Continuation Committee did: "The Committee voted that its basis would be the newly defined *mission* of the *Church* as evangelism *and* social responsibility" (344). Thus, through the ongoing efforts of the Lausanne Continuation Committee (later renamed the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization), the concrete legacy of Lausanne has been the pursuit of a "holistic evangelism" that replicates the practical agenda of the ecumenical movement (347-350).

THE TRAJECTORIES CONVERGE

And so the two trajectories converged. The new, larger, holistic evangelism became not just the watchword of ecumenicals, but the collective understanding and commitment of a unified global coalition of evangelicals.[1]

To be sure, the two movements remained theologically opposed to each other: while the ecumenicals rejected Scripture's inerrancy and relativized its authority, the evangelicals held firm to both; while the ecumenicals universalized away the gospel, the evangelicals, by and large, defended and proclaimed the biblical good news about Christ and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation.

Yet mission is not so easily sealed off from theology. Consider, for example, what John Stott writes in his *Christian Mission in the Modern World*:

> As for situations, there will be times when a person's eternal destiny is the most urgent consideration, for we must not forget that men without Christ are perishing. But there will certainly be other times when a person's material need is so pressing that he would not be able to hear the gospel if we shared it with him. (28)

Clearly Stott's main point here is that people's physical needs demand our compassionate consideration. But does he really mean to say that there are times when a person's material need is more urgent than his need to be reconciled to God? If so, I would propose that Stott has adopted a diagnosis of the human problem that materially differs from Scripture's. This example suggests that one does not adopt a new view of the church's mission without first adopting a new assessment of man's problem and God's solution to that problem.[2] That is to say, one does not adopt a new definition of mission without also necessarily adopting, at least on some level, a new theology.

Through John Stott's leadership, Lausanne certainly reasserted several foundational evangelical doctrines, but insofar as it adopted the ecumenical redefinition of mission, it inserted an alien, inconsistent element into evangelical theology. On the crucial question of the church's mission, the trajectories converged, and the echoes of that convergence continue to reverberate through evangelicalism:

"Incarnational ministry." "Holistic evangelism." "Proclaiming the whole gospel to the whole person." "Doing justice and preaching grace." "Bringing God's *shalom* to the earth."

We've heard these definitions of the church's mission before. But have we seen where they're from, where they lead, and what theology drives them?

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[1] Reflecting on the definition of mission developed by ecumenicals and adopted by some evangelicals in the Lausanne movement, David Hesselgrave draws a similar conclusion: "In sum, there are obvious parallels between ecumenism at the beginning of the twentieth century and evangelicalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (David J. Hesselgrave, "Will We Correct the Edinburgh Error? Future Mission in Historical Perspective" in *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Vol. 49, No. 2, [2007]: 134).
[2] For more on the danger of diagnosing the human problem in a way that differs from Scripture, see Jonathan Leeman's article in the present eJournal.

January/February 2010

Book Review: *The Rabbit and the Elephant: Why Small Is the New Big for Today's Church*, by Tony and Felicity Dale and George Barna
Reviewed by *Aaron Menikoff*

Tony and Felicity Dale and George Barna, *The Rabbit and the Elephant: Why Small Is the New Big for Today's Church*.
Barnabooks, 2009. 256 pages. $17.99

Contrary to the subtitle, this book is *not* an argument for small churches in general but for house churches in particular. Moreover, the Dales and Barna advocate a particular movement of house churches known as House2House.

The authors argue that house churches, or what they call "simple" churches, are better at multiplying than larger, traditional churches. By focusing on basic ministries like hospitality and evangelism, and by rejecting the need for trained leadership, a house church can spring up wherever and whenever it is necessary.

An important critique of the contemporary church runs through the pages of *The Rabbit and the Elephant.* Traditional or "legacy" churches, the authors insist, seem more interested in putting on a show than changing lives. Members of these churches "go to a special place at a special time to watch special people perform. Once or twice a week, they sing a few songs, listen to a monologue, put money in the offering plate, and go home" (25). Traditional churches have become meeting places for lazy Christians instead of being vibrant hubs of gospel ministry.

The Dales and Barna argue that church today is failing in its evangelism and disciple-making. "Increasingly we have come to understand that becoming a disciple of Jesus has little to do with responding to an altar call or praying the sinner's prayer" (140). Instead of getting to know non-believers and lovingly speaking truth into their lives, many Christians invite them to an event in the hope that someone else will close the deal. "The great commission tells us to make disciples, which is far more than a 'decision' or 'prayer of salvation.' God wants disciples, not mere converts. He is seeking a radical life change, a whole new way" (89-90). In addition, the Dales and Barna are rightly disturbed by the metrics used to measure success in evangelical life.

Furthermore, they argue that the church today is overly reliant on a professionalized ministry to meet the needs of church members. Christians should do more than listen to educated pastors. Churches should be preparing "an army of ordinary people who will invade their world with the Good News of the Kingdom and thereby become radically effective in their communities" (34).

Most of the authors' critiques of the contemporary church are valid. Many Christians and non-Christians find the established church irrelevant. Change does need to be made.

So what is the prescription for progress found in *The Rabbit and the Elephant*?

By being small, focused, and spiritual, house churches will be vibrant and growing. Traditional churches depend more on structures than the Holy Spirit (42). Facilities are like an albatross hanging around the neck of congregations and keeping them from doing the actual work of the ministry. Christians need to be freed up to go out in faith, seeking the lost and dispossessed (101). To be in a house church, the Dales and Barna argue, is to relinquish control and allow the Spirit to work.

Yet the House2House movement (as characterized in *The Rabbit and the Elephant*) is not the answer to the church's woes, because the authors treat the Word of God, the role of pastors, and the church itself

far too lightly for the movement to be of lasting significance.

THE WORD OF GOD

One of the early chapters is called "The Master's Voice" and it is about listening to God. The Dales and Barna say that Scripture is just one of many ways that God speaks, and though the authors describe the Bible as "our final plumb line against which any other word from God is measured," the reader is left with the feeling that the Bible is not sufficient for faith and practice (51). Instead, we should be looking for God to speak in an inner peace, dreams and visions, prophecy, counselors, and finally, in action. "Just as hearing God's voice involves recognizing when He is speaking through our thoughts, seeing Him involves realizing that He may speak through the pictures of our imagination" (53).

Can God speak through prophecy, dreams and visions, and the "pictures of our imagination"? He can speak however he wants to speak! But if the concern really is to hear the Lord speak clearly, then why not *first* turn to God's Word in careful study and *then* by the power of the Holy Spirit, respond accordingly?

THE ROLE OF PASTORS

The authors believe the church should have leaders, and they rightly critique the CEO pastor who is more focused on programs than people (148). Nonetheless, they simply are not correct when they assert that "New Testament leadership is 'flat,' or nonhierarchical" (151). Such a statement makes no sense of 1 Timothy 3:5, which equates management of the home to care of the church. It makes no sense of Hebrews 13:17, which says the leaders in the church are to be obeyed. There *is* a hierarchy of sorts in the church. Christ is the head of the church, and I believe the congregation, as a whole, has earthly responsibility for doctrine and selecting leaders. Nonetheless, once selected, those leaders are to teach and lead.

Leadership in this house church movement is undervalued. When the authors describe their own experience in a house church, they revel in the fact that no one could tell who was leading the meeting (80). It seems they have no interest in leaders who will heed Paul's instructions to Timothy by keeping the pattern of sound teaching and guarding the good deposit which has been entrusted to them (2 Tim. 1:13-14). In fact, the authors deliberately discourage an educated ministry in the local church. Theological training, they argue, is not for pastors in the local church. Using the "highly educated Paul" as their example, the authors surmise that such "training is more likely to be used at a strategic, regional level than in the day-to-day life of the average simple church" (149). Is it just me or is that a scary statement? Reserve the training for regional churches and leave the "day-to-day" ministers untrained?

THE CHURCH

Though *The Rabbit and the Elephant* is about the church, there is little explanation of what the church is beyond a series of interconnected relationships. What constitutes a church? Is there a difference between a group of non-Christians meeting to discuss Christianity and a group of Christians gathering to celebrate a baptism?

The authors of *The Rabbit and the Elephant* place a healthy emphasis on evangelism. The goal of the House2House church movement is authentic relationships that draw unbelievers into the kingdom of God. The irony is that by ignoring the biblical concept of the church there is less accountability. The authors admitted to being part of twelve new church plants all at once (95). Were they accountable to any one church or all of them? If someone sins but does not repent, is there any means to pursue loving and corrective church discipline? The authors will say that such questions miss the point. "One of the biggest paradigm shifts within the simple church reformation is the understanding that when we are following the Holy Spirit, there is little need for organization and no need for hierarchical control" (200-01).

But what would they say when the man who has been a Christian for twenty years and married for fifteen decides to divorce his wife? After a rebuke, would he be dismissed from the church? This seems unlikely in a church that lacks any organization. If there is no organization there is no discipline. If there is no discipline there is no accountability. If there is no accountability there is no love. And if there is no love there is no church.

IN CONCLSION…

The problem with *The Rabbit and the Elephant* is not that they advocate house churches. Scripture does not dictate wherea church should meet or how many members a church should have. Moreover, house churches can be Word-centered and Gospel-focused. But the Word of God must be central, leadership must be a priority, and the church must be defined.

When I look at the House2House movement through the lens of *The Rabbit and the Elephant* I see Christians who rightly prioritize evangelism, rightly see faults with larger churches, but wrongly dismiss God's revelation about the church itself. For this reason, *The Rabbit and the Elephant* is not a useful tool for the pastor's toolbox.

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January/February 2010

Book Review: *Why Join a Small Church?*, by John Benton
Reviewed by *Aaron Menikoff*

John Benton, *Why Join a Small Church?*
Christian Focus, 2009. 61 pages. $7.99

John Benton, pastor of Chertsey Street Baptist Church and editor of *Evangelicals Now,* strikes back against the mega-church movement with his book *Why Join a Small Church*? In it, he defends Christians pouring their lives into small and maybe even struggling congregations instead of joining the large church across town or, if you are a church planter, starting from scratch in the school auditorium next door.

Benton insists that a "philosophical materialism" has so permeated evangelical life that we are willing to drive past two or three small, orthodox congregations in order to attend the church with a sharper preacher, a vibrant youth ministry, and coffee-on-demand. "God loves what is small," Benton asserts, so the church-seeker ought to be willing to take a risk by joining a congregation with few creature-comforts but a love for God's Word and a heart for God's people.

A SMALL CHURCH JOURNEY

I've been there. I joined Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church (as it was then called) the week before Mark Dever was installed as the pastor. I was young but I was certainly not restless and reformed. I had no evangelical heroes at the time. In fact, I'm pretty sure I didn't know what evangelical meant. I was interested in national government, not church government. Yet at this "little" church, I found community and theology, life and doctrine, and it changed my life. After getting married about a year later, I remember how my wife and I prayed the Lord would bring other young couples to the church. And he did. Lots.

A few years later, when we moved to Louisville, we joined another tiny church—this one was even smaller. We moved a half-block down the street. Third Avenue Baptist Church was nothing to boast about. It was the home of cantankerous seniors and peeling paint. We went through more than one pastor, we grew and shrank, grew and shrank. Now, with a permanent pastor in place, it is really growing. It still has its struggles (that building is really old!), and it is a young church (largely made up of seminary and college students), but years ago there was not a college student in sight. It is amazing to see what the Lord has done with that small church.

The church I pastor today in Atlanta is not presently and has never been a megachurch, but after my experiences in DC and Louisville, it feels like a one. We have roughly 300 people on Sunday morning, and sometimes I still feel out of sorts as I remember the days when I could tell if someone was missing. Yet while the church feels oddly big to me, to some people it feels just right. A man recently sat in my office telling me why he came to our church. He said, "You weren't the largest church and you weren't the smallest church, you were just right!"

DON'T DESPISE THE DAY OF SMALL…CHURCHES?

Now, back to our book. Benton gives the impression that God uniquely loves small churches, yet I'm not so sure. Benton argues that because God spared just Noah and his family, because God's promise came through Abram, because He used an aged Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and because Jesus was born a baby and yet the King, God must have a special place in His heart for that which is small in the eyes of the world, like small churches.

I think Benton's reasoning gives those in small churches good reason to think twice before leaving, but I'm not convinced that it is reason enough to make it my mission to join or pastor a small church, or to deliberately keep my church small.

What is tantalizing, however, is Benton's heart to rescue the small church from obscurity and defend it as a potential trophy of God just waiting to be polished. Why are so many church planters skipping over dying churches and planting churches right next door? Certainly there are a lot of reasons: entrenched leadership, the desire for a ministry unencumbered by the traditions of the past, and so on. I get it. But certainly there is room, as Benton suggests, for mature believers to find congregations that are like-minded (at least on paper) and seek to influence them so that the existing congregation can have a fresh experience of God's grace and so that the existing facility can be reclaimed as a beacon of light instead of a stumbling block for its neighbors. Benton puts it this way: "O how good it would be for no more churches to close, but instead for them to start growing. How it would get non-Christians scratching their heads and perhaps to thinking again about Jesus. So join a small church" (16).

Truth be told, I think some small churches ought to close. I don't know what it is like in England, but in some U.S. cities it seems like there is a church on every block. When people walked to church that made sense. Today it doesn't. Nonetheless, there are thousands of small congregations that would be well served by a young pastor seeing what it *could* be instead of dismissing it as a relic of the ancient past, a bastion of traditionalism, or an impediment to his church growth strategy. The opportunities for congregations to be reclaimed are tantalizing. Maybe, just maybe, the Lord wants zealous men who have chosen *not* to risk their lives in the 10/40 window to walk alongside an eighty year old for a few years and do a few funerals before changing the world. Maybe the Lord would be pleased by parents leading their children to a place of service to understand better how we have been served by Christ, instead of taking them to a church where every conceivable need is met. Maybe small churches do have a lot to offer.

This is the heart of Benton's message, and I think it is worth listening to. In an age that rightly prizes authenticity, it doesn't get much more authentic than a local church serving a community for the glory of God.

That said, I don't think anyone should make being part of a small church his goal in life. We want churches to grow spiritually *and* numerically. But in a church culture overwhelmed first by the megachurch movement and now by the multi-site movement, someone needs to stand up and say, "We are not to believe the doubts and fears that the little church is irrelevant or that we are wasting our time in giving our energies to its life and outreach. Rather, we are, in faith, to look beyond our circumstances to the sure promises of God, and work hard for him. And in the light of eternity we shall find that we have spent our lives in the best possible way" (55). Benton said it, and I'm glad he did.

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